EARLY CHRISTIAN EXPLANATIONS OF THE TRINITY IN ARABIC IN THE CONTEXT OF MUSLIM THEOLOGY

by

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A thesis submitted to the University of Birmingham
for the degree of DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

School of Philosophy, Theology and Religion
University of Birmingham
March 2011

ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis examines the works of Theodore Abū Qurra (d.c.829), Abū Rā'iṭa (d. c.835), and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī (d.c.850); three of the earliest known Christian theologians to explain and defend their beliefs in Arabic, under Islamic rule. In particular, it focuses on their respective explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity: assessing each individual author's writings; investigating the tools and arguments they employ; and considering the extent to which they engaged with Islamic theological thought (*kalām*), primarily through their borrowing of concepts and structures from an internal Islamic debate concerning the divine attributes of God. This study asks to what extent these Christians were essentially translating their traditional doctrine into Arabic, and to what extent they developed a new expression of the Trinity, conceptually influenced by Islamic thinking.

The key conclusion of this thesis is that Christian explanations of the Trinity in Arabic, whilst they show a deep awareness of Islamic thought and make use of contemporary Muslim debates surrounding the nature and unity of God, cannot be

said to represent a development in Christian theology. Rather, such works should be viewed as an informed and creative response to the pressures and challenges of their Islamic surroundings.

To my mother Mary Elizabeth and my father Rafiq Haidar Husseini

For their unwavering love, unending support and utter faith.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to begin by thanking my grandmother Leila al-Khalidi and my aunt Tima al-Husseini who, through hours of assisting me with painstaking translations, now know the lives and works of Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī more than they would perhaps care to. Their help has been more valuable than I can express in a few short words. I would also like to reiterate my thanks to my mother and father, to whom I dedicate this work, and without whose emotional, practical and financial support I simply would not have been able to undertake such a project. I am also grateful for the good humour and support of my siblings, Tariq, Serene, and Talal, and particularly our surrogate family member, Troy, who has made it his vocation to point out the 'odd' act of procrastination over the past three years.

Further acknowledgment goes to my wonderful friend and fellow PhD candidate Gemma Knowles for being there at every stage of this process: from the study sessions and reassuring cups of tea through to the final proof reading of the work. By

the same token my thanks goes to Dr. Emily Scmidt who, having been through this process recently, gave me the wise words of encouragement that only someone who has been there can. My appreciation also extends to Vivienne Gorman, whose calm and rational presence has been invaluable; to a soon-to-be Dr. James Green for helping me to express my ideas a touch more eloquently in the final stages; and to the ladies and gentleman of Edgbaston Hockey Club for providing regular doses of much needed human contact and respite from the challenges of this undertaking. I would also like to take the opportunity here to express my gratitude to the AHRC, whose generous funding allowed me to spend three years studying a subject of my own choosing and passion.

Finally, and most importantly, my heartfelt thanks go to my supervisor, Professor David Thomas, who has supported and encouraged me throughout this whole process; and who has put up with messy drafts, ridiculous questions and painfully slow Arabic translation attempts. His erudition and infectious enthusiasm for this subject are truly inspiring. I will very much miss our supervision meetings.

CONTENTS

Library of Congress and the American Library Association

Transliteration Scheme

Initial	Medial	Final	Alone	Romanization
ا	ـا	ـا	ا	omit
بـ	ـبـ	ـب	ب	b
تـ	ـتـ	ـت	ت	t
ثـ	ـثـ	ـث	ث	th
جـ	ـجـ	ـج	ج	j
حـ	ـحـ	ـح	ح	ḥ
خـ	ـخـ	ـخ	خ	kh
د	ـد	ـد	د	d
ذ	ـذ	ـذ	ذ	dh
ر	ـر	ـر	ر	r
ز	ـز	ـز	ز	z
سـ	ـسـ	ـس	س	s
شـ	ـشـ	ـش	ش	sh
صـ	ـصـ	ـص	ص	ṣ
ضـ	ـضـ	ـض	ض	ḍ
طـ	ـطـ	ـط	ط	ṭ
ظـ	ـظـ	ـظ	ظ	ẓ
عـ	ـعـ	ـع	ع	‘ (ayn)
غـ	ـغـ	ـغ	غ	gh
فـ	ـفـ	ـف	ف	f
قـ	ـقـ	ـق	ق	q
كـ	ـكـ	ـك	ك	k
لـ	ـلـ	ـل	ل	l
مـ	ـمـ	ـم	م	m
نـ	ـنـ	ـن	ن	n
هـ	ـهـ	ـه	ه	h
و	ـو	ـو	و	w
يـ	ـيـ	ـى	ى	y

Vowels and dipthongs:

◌َ	a	◌َا	ā	◌ِى	ī
◌ُ		◌َى		◌َوْ	aw
◌ِ	u	◌ُو	á	◌َىْ	

INTRODUCTION

This doctoral thesis examines the works of three of the earliest known Christian theologians to explain and defend their beliefs in Arabic. In particular, it deals with their writings on the doctrine of the Trinity, which has proven to be a fundamental theological stumbling block throughout the history of Christian-Muslim interaction. The Christian authors in question lived at the heart of the Islamic empire in the early ninth century C.E. and during that period composed a number of writings expounding their beliefs in a language which, following the Arab-Islamic conquests of the mid to late seventh century, had become the primary language of the newly established Islamic Empire.

Coincidentally, the three authors who are most familiar to scholars of this period, and who will form the subject of this thesis, also happen to represent the three major Christian denominations of the time. Theodore Abū Qurra (d.c.829), the subject of

Chapter Two, was the Melkite Bishop of Harran at some point during his life. Abū Rā'iṭa (d. c.835), whose writings are investigated in the third chapter, was a Syrian Orthdodox (Jacobite) cleric from the modern day Iraqi town of Takrit. The last of our scholars, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī (d.c.850), represented the East Syrian (Nestorian) Church, and is thought to have come from Basra, one of the major intellectual centres of the 'Abbāsid empire at that time. This coincidence however, has put the three authors at risk of being treated as examples of a homogeneous entity in terms of their works, their aims and their engagement with Islamic thought. The intentions of this study, therefore, are twofold: firstly, to analyse and compare the writings of the three authors on the Trinity, highlighting the subtle yet significant differences in their presentations of the doctrine; and secondly to examine their explanations of the Trinity in terms of their engagement with Muslim modes of thought, in order to assess their place and function in Islamic society.

Despite an increase in interest and availability of texts from this period, rather little is concretely known about their contents, authors and contexts, especially in the West. Progress has been made in recent years to improve this situation, both in terms of making works accessible and interpreting their contents, with the aim of exploring more deeply the development of Eastern Christianity and its expression in an Arabic Islamic context. Many of Abū Qurra and Abū Rā'iṭa's works have been published in Arabic and translated into English among other modern languages: Dr. John Lamoreaux's recent English translation of many of Theodore Abu Qurra's writings in 2005 and Dr. Sandra Keating's translation of and commentary on a number of Abū Rā'iṭa's works in 2006 have been most welcome in this respect. 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's works unfortunately still lack a full translation, although the modern editor, Michel Hayek, has provided an introduction and summary in French.[1] A body of secondary literature continues to grow around these texts, as efforts are made to ascertain what the works of these authors can tell us about the context in which these Christian

[1] Hayek, M. (ed) *`Ammar al-Baṣrī: kitāb al-burhān. wa-kitāb al-masā'il wa-al-ajwiba*. (Beirut : Dar al-Mashriq: al-Maktabah al-Sharqiyah, 1977)

theologians lived and wrote, of their place within Islamic society, and the expression and development of their faith in that context.[2]

There is general agreement in the academic community as to the challenges and circumstances that these Christian authors faced in the early ninth century and, to a certain extent, how they responded. In his most recent book entitled *The church in the shadow of the mosque*, Prof. Sidney Griffith summarises the situation succinctly:

> 'The use of the Arabic language…provided the opportunity for the development of Christian theology in a new key, within a new frame of reference and with new challenges for Christian apologists.[3]

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[2] See for example: Griffith, S.H. *The church in the shadow of the mosque: Christians and Muslims in the world of Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008); _______. *The Beginnings of Christian Theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian Encounters in the Early Islamic Period* (Aldershot; Vermont: Ashgate Variorum, 2002); Keating, S. *Defending the "people of truth" in the early Islamic period: the Christian apologies of Abū Rāʾiṭah*, History of Christian-Muslim relations, vol. 4 (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2006); Swanson, M. 'Apologetics, catechesis, and the question of audience in "On the Triune Nature of God" (Sinai Arabic 154) and three treatises of Theodore Abu Qurrah', in Tamcke, M. (ed) *Christians and Muslims in dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the middle ages* (Beirut: Ergon Verlag Wurzburg, 2007); _______'Beyond Prooftexting (2): The use of the Bible in some early Arabic Christian apologies', *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, D. Thomas (ed.) (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

He also observes elsewhere:

> ‘As a result, the discourse of the Christian apologists in Arabic presents a conceptual profile that cannot easily be mistaken for Christian theology in any other community of Christian discourse.’[4]

Similarly, Keating notes:

> ‘…it is clear the Christian community at the turn of the ninth century living under Islamic rule was confronted with a new situation that necessitated a creative response.’[5]

And, speaking of Abū Rā’iṭa concludes:

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[3] Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*,156

[4] ibid., 75

[5] Keating, *Defending the “People of Truth”*, 32

> 'Unlike many of his predecessors, he did not simply translate the Syriac tradition into the new language of Arabic. Rather, he began the attempt to communicate Christian faith clearly and coherently in a new idiom already heavily influenced by a religion hostile to it.'[6]

This new 'situation' or 'frame of reference' clearly prompted Christian authors of this period to compose apologetic treatises which were consciously moulded to reflect Islamic concerns and which explained Christian doctrines using Islamic language and concepts borrowed from a concurrent Muslim debate concerning the divine attributes of God.

The issues that current scholarship does not appear to have come to a conclusion about, and therefore require further exploration, are: how far each of these Christians utilised Muslim concepts; what they were trying to accomplish with their respective

[6] ibid., 65

writings; and how far Christian theology took on a new distinctive form in the Islamic milieu. These questions will form the main focus of the present study.

Whilst some scholars have tended to focus on Christian authors of this period, others have been more interested in the Islamic side, in the individuals and groups with whom these Christians and their peers most likely engaged. Prof. Richard Frank and Prof. Josef van Ess have published numerous works concerning the development of Islamic thought in the early period,[7] with specific focus on *kalām* (broadly understood as 'Islamic theological thought') and those who advocated this system of thought, most famously the Mu'tazilī school. Prof. David Thomas also works closely with early Islamic and Christian theological texts, particularly Muslim writings on Christianity.[8] Whilst Muslim theological texts of the early ninth century are unfortunately lacking for

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[7] See for example: Ess, Josef van. *The flowering of Muslim theology* , J.M. Todd (trans), (Cambridge, M.A.: London: Harvard University Press, 2006); and _______. *Theologie und Gesellschaft im. 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra, eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens in frühen Islam*, 6 vols (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991-1997); Frank, Richard M. Beings *and Their Attributes: The Teaching of the Basrian School of the Mu'tazila in the Classical Period* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1978); ________. 'The kalām, an art of contradition-making or theological science? Some remarks on the question' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 88 (1968); and ________. 'The science of Kalām' in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 2 (1992) 7-37

[8] See for example: Thomas, David Richard (ed.) *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology. History of Christian-Muslim relations*, vol. 10, (Leiden: Brill, 2008); ________. 'A Mu'tazili Response to Christianity: Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'I's Attack on the Trinity and Incarnation', *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage*, R. Ebied and H. Teule (Leuven; Paris; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004)

the most part, there are a few sources which add to the picture of Christian-Muslim interaction in the early ninth century. These primarily include Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq's *Radd ʻalā al-tathlīth* (*Refutation of the Trinity*)[9] and Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī's *Radd ʻalā al-Naṣāra* (*Refutation of the Christians*)[10], along with a number of slightly later sources.[11]

This study goes beyond current literature by focusing specifically on explanations of the Trinity within an Islamic theological context while paying close attention to the differing emphases and priorities of the respective authors in their presentations of the doctrine; and by drawing conclusions concerning the fascinating question of how far Christian theologians engaged with Islamic modes of thought, and thus how far Christian Arabic expressions of the doctrine of the Trinity represent a new form of

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[9] Thomas, David Richard. (ed. and trans.) *Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam: Abū Īsā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

[10] Périer, Augustin. (ed. and trans.) ʻUn traité de Yahyā ben ʻAdī: défense du dogme de la trinité contre les objections d'al-Kindī', in R. Graffin (ed) *Revue de l'orient Chrétien*, vol. 2, no. 22 (1920-21)

[11] In particular Abū al-Ḥasan ʻAlī al-Ash'arī's *Maqālāt al Islāmiyyīn*, H. Ritter (ed.), *Die Dogmatischen Lehren der Anhänger des Islam,* 3rd edition (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1930); Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī's (d. 1013) *Kitāb al-Tamḥīd* and ʻAbd al-Jabbār al-Hamdhānī's (d.1025) *al-Mughnī fī Adwāb al-Tawḥīd wa-al-ʻAdl*, both in Thomas, D. (ed.) *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology. History of Christian-Muslim relations*, vol. 10, (Leiden: Brill, 2008)

Christian theology. To this end, the focus is primarily on the contents of these works: that is to say the arguments, proofs, and tools Christians use in order to clarify their doctrine, as opposed to the linguistic style of their writing, their knowledge of Arabic and the use of Islamic nuances and Qur'anic allusions. Similarly, the question of audience for these works, although it is naturally linked to the aims and purposes of the authors, is not a central concern of this study and will therefore only be referred to as and where it relates directly to the main focus of the thesis, and will be discussed briefly in chapter six. Very broadly speaking, it seems that Christians writing theological works in Arabic had a dual audience in mind, though the balance of that audience varies across authors and across individual works, and will be referred to where relevant.

For the purposes of clarification, the central question of the thesis may be presented, somewhat simplistically, as two alternatives. From available sources, it would appear that Christian theologians who wrote in Arabic, such as Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, felt pressure from their Muslim neighbours and rulers to account for their

faith. Having both the ability and need to express their doctrines into Arabic, it could be suggested that for the most part they did exactly that, by translating their traditional doctrines into a new language which, despite having looked linguistically different to previous expositions, remained fundamentally the same in conceptual terms.

On the other hand, one might take a slightly different view, that Christians would have been immersed in their 'new' Islamic context by this time to the point that, rather than purely translating doctrines and moulding their explanations in order to act as apologists in a new context, they would have been asking and attempting to answer similar questions to the Muslims about the nature of God.

It is evident that these two views are not mutually exclusive positions. The extent to which Christians were being traditional or original, responding or asking their own questions, being apologists or creative theologians is very much a question of

degree. What we do know is that all three authors used Muslim concepts to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity in Arabic. One must therefore examine how far each author engaged with Islamic thought: whether as Christian apologists they saw it primarily as a method of explication and made use of it without seeking to re-evaluate their own doctrines within a Muslim conceptual framework, or how far they should be seen as actually considering Christian doctrines in a new light as a consequence of their Islamic surroundings and thus engaging in a sort of parallel exercise to their Muslim counterparts.

One final and related question which is raised as a result of this study, concerns the label '*Christian mutakallimūn*'. The term *mutakallim*, meaning one who engaged in *kalām*, (Islamic theological thought), is very much an Islamic term. The Muslim *mutakallimūn* are often primarily considered as apologists or defenders of faith, but were also very much truth seekers, searching to supplement revelation using God given reason. As a result of their apologetic writings and their use of Muslim concepts and the style of argumentation common to *kalām*, the three authors who form the

focus of this study are often referred to as Christian *mutakallimūn*. The issue which naturally arises from the central research question of this thesis is whether this is truly an appropriate label for all, if indeed any, of the three authors. As such, it is one which will be explored briefly in the second part of this study, with a view to raising the matter for further investigation.

Methodologically speaking, Part One of this thesis will set the context in which Christian authors of the early ninth century were writing, before looking at the three individual authors and their writings on the Trinity in the following chapters. Each text will be described and analysed closely on its own merits and within its particular historical and intellectual context, allowing for conclusions to be drawn about each author and his works separately. Part Two will then deal with the three authors comparatively, once again through close textual analysis, identifying the tools used to explain and defend the doctrine of the Trinity in Arabic and demonstrating how they are employed by the three authors. The final chapter will provide an evaluative

discussion concerning the aims and place of these Christian theologians in the Islamic Empire.

In terms of content, Chapter One will explore the historical, political, social and intellectual contexts in which these Christian authors were composing their works, in order to give the reader some background information and outline key issues to consider when reading works on the Trinity. Section One will briefly address the historical, social and linguistic context of Christians living in the Islamic empire. Section Two will look at the Christian intellectual heritage before and during the early Islamic period, through two prominent Christian theologians from the Syriac and Greek traditions respectively: Philoxenus of Mabbug and John of Damascus. Section Three will investigate the Islamic context in a similar manner, through two theologians of different schools of thought: Abū al-Hudhayl and Ibn Kullāb, as well as introducing the concept of *kalām*, which has an important bearing on the question of how far these Christian authors engaged with Islamic thinking and what they were trying to achieve. The final section of this chapter will look at Muslim criticisms of the doctrine of the Trinity, through the ninth century example of Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī, in

order to set the backdrop against which to read the works of the Christian authors at the heart of this study.

Chapters Two to Four will look at three of the main representatives of Christian Arabic theological writings in the early ninth century, by way of close textual analysis of writings pertaining to the doctrine of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity has been selected as motif both as one of the primary issues of concern for Muslims who, based on passages in the Qur'an, accused Christians of being polytheists, and in order to focus on selected texts in a more detailed manner. Each of these chapters will deal with the three authors individually, offering a detailed exposition and analysis of their writings concerning the unity of God. Although subsections within each of the three chapters vary, in order to faithfully represent each author on his own terms, there are a number of themes which have been borne in mind when examining each of the authors' works, which will enable a meaningful comparison of their works in Part Two. These themes are as follows:

1. Premises and start point of each author

2. Explanation of the Oneness of God

3. Status of the hypostases in each author's thinking

4. Awareness and use of Islamic thought and debate

Part Two will then take a more comparative approach, looking at the three authors and their writings on the Trinity side by side, in order to assess how they are explaining the doctrine to their Muslim counterparts and therefore to what extent they are engaging with Islamic thinking in order to present their Christian beliefs. To this end, Chapter Five will look at the various tools i.e. the methods of argumentation and content of arguments that these authors are using, investigating the origins of such arguments and the interactions with their Muslim opponents. A detailed discussion of the central research questions posed above in relation to each author individually and comparatively, and the consideration of whether these Christian theologians can properly be called *mutakallimūn,* will occupy Chapter Six, with the aim of shedding further light on the expression of Christian faith in the Islamic milieu and the place of

Arabic-speaking Christian theologians in the fabric of early ninth century Islamic society.

The transliteration system which will be employed throughout this thesis is the system approved by the Library of Congress and the American Library Association. Biblical quotations are taken from the English Standard Version unless otherwise stated, as available from: http://www.biblegateway.com/. Qur'anic quotations are taken from 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī's translation, but always checked against the Arabic, as accessed in the online version available from: http://al-quran.info.

PART ONE: THREE ARABIC-SPEAKING CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS AND THEIR WRITINGS ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY (C.800-850)

CHAPTER 1: HISTORICAL AND INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT

The Christian authors who form the subject of this thesis are products of a fascinating period in medieval Middle Eastern history. The birth of Islam in the seventh century C.E. and its spread over the subsequent two centuries shaped the context in which Christians such as Theodore Abū Qurra, Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī found themselves, not only ruled by an Arab Islamic dynasty and therefore immersed in a new language and culture, but also theologically challenged by a religion still very much in its formative period and one whose scripture openly criticised Christian beliefs and practises. This rather particular context, in which the meeting of languages, cultures and religions took place under rulers who promoted the transmission of foreign learning into Arabic and who appear to have allowed a fair degree of intellectual freedom, provided a unique opportunity for Arabic-speaking Christian authors to defend their traditional beliefs in a creative and novel way. This chapter aims to sketch out the context in which these authors lived and wrote in order to aid one's understanding and appreciation of their works, which will be examined in

the following chapters. It will include a brief outline of the historical, social and linguistic context of Christians in the Islamic empire; the Christian intellectual heritage of the authors studied in this thesis; the Islamic intellectual context during this period; and an insight into the sorts of criticisms Muslims were making of the doctrine of the Trinity in the ninth century.

1.1 Christians in the Islamic Empire: Historical, Social and Linguistic contexts

1.1.1 Historical context

It is difficult to imagine that anyone living at the time of the Prophet Muhammad would have been able to foresee the success of Islam; or the spread of an Islamic empire which, by the mid-eighth century C.E., would stretch from the westernmost border of China to the southern border of modern-day France. One of the most striking features is undoubtedly the pace at which Arab conquerors managed to overcome lands and subjugate their populations to Muslim control.[12] Historians have

[12] Glubb, J. B. *The empire of the Arabs* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1963)

attributde the military success of the Arab conquests to a number of factors, the most pertinent being that of the exhaustion of both the Byzantine and Sassanid armies, who had been engaged in warfare with one another for almost thirty years prior to the Arab invasions.[13] At the time, however, it appears that some saw the surprising success of the Muslims as proof of God's assistance in their campaign and punishment of the Byzantine rulers, and therefore converted to Islam.[14]

To the east of the Arabian Peninsula, lands which fell to the Arab forces had formerly been a part of the Sassanid Empire (226-651) with modern-day Iran at its heart. To the north and west it was the Christian Byzantines who were met by Arab Islamic forces. Damascus was one of the first cities to surrender to Muslim rule in 635, with Jerusalem falling three years later. By the time Caesarea was successfully conquered in 640, the whole of Syria/Palestine had been incorporated into the Arab Islamic Empire. Egypt soon followed. Meanwhile in the East, Arab armies also began

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[13] Foss, C. 'The Persians in Asia Minor and the end of antiquity' in M. Bonner (ed.) *Arab-Byzantine relations in early Islamic times*, The formation of the classical Islamic world, vol. 8 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 3-30

[14] Cragg, K. *The Arab Christian: a history in the Middle East* (London: Mowbray, 1992), 60

to take cities including the border town of Hira in around 633 and later Mosul in 641, before crossing the mountains into Iran, reaching what would become the easternmost point of their empire in around the middle of the seventh century.[15]

1.1.2. Social context

For the non-Muslim populations of cities and regions which came under Muslim control there were two choices: conversion to Islam; or the acceptance of a treaty in the spirit of the Constitution of Medina, which Muhammad had drafted with non-Muslims on his arrival in the city in 622. Converts would, in theory, enjoy the same status as any other Muslim.[16] Those who chose not to convert, in return for their surrender and the payment of a type of poll tax (*jizya*), would receive protection and the right to worship their own faith. It seems that for some, Arab Islamic forces were

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[15] Donner, F. M. 'The Islamic Conquests' in Yousef M.Choueri (ed.) *A companion to the history of the Middle East* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), 31

[16] al-Tabarī, Abū Jāfar Muḥammad ibn Jarīr. *The crisis of the early caliphate,* R. Stephen Humphreys (trans.) *History of al-Tabari 15* (New York : State University of New York Press, 1990), 103-104

welcomed as preferable to Byzantine rule,[17] renowned for high taxes[18] and constant wars with Sassanid neighbours. Moreover, for the Jews, who had been subjected to harsh laws under Christian rule, their elevation alongside Christians as 'People of the Book' actually appears to have improved their situation.[19] By the same token, non-orthodox Christian denominations found themselves in an equal position to those who professed the orthodox line of the Byzantine Emperor according to the Fourth Ecumenical Council of 451.[20] It was for this reason that the Coptic Church in Egypt were instructed by the Bishop of Alexandria not to resist Arab conquest, as he foresaw the end to their persecution by those who professed Byzantine orthodoxy.[21]

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[17] Esposito, J. L. *Islam*: *The straight path*, expanded edition, (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 39

[18] Bogle, E. C*. Islam: origin and belief*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998), 49

[19] Wagner, W. 'Christianity, Islamic *shariah,* and civil rights' available from: http://www.samford.edu/lillyhumanrights/papers/Wagner_Christianity.pdf; accessed 16/05/08

[20] See: Schick, R. *The Christian communities of Palestine: from Byzantine to Islamic rule*. (New Jersey: The Darwin Press. Inc., 1995), 178; and also: Atiyah, A. S. *A history of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd and University of Notre Dame Press, 1967, reprint Kraus Reprint, 1980),184

[21] Hitti, P. K. *A history of the Arabs*, revised 10th edition (first published 1937) (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 165

Christians and Jews who refused to convert thus became *ahl al-dhimma*, literally meaning ‘people of protection’ or ‘protected people’. The status and treatment of the *dhimmī*s remains a matter of debate. Some sources have led scholars to believe that those who became the *ahl al-dhimma* were discriminated against and very much treated as second class citizens, whereas others suggest that the policies and rules pertaining to the *dhimmi* communities, as seen in the Pact of ‘Umar, were not strictly enforced.[22] Indeed, it is likely that the situation varied from place to place, and under the authority of different rulers over the course of time.[23]

Initially, the new Muslim rulers kept the well-established administration system of the former Byzantine Empire, a decision which has been described as ‘part of the secret of the success of the Arab expansion’.[24] Christians formed an indispensable element of this system, therefore many retained their positions as civil servants, administrators, doctors and other prominent offices in Islamic society. In 706, on the

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[22] Thomas, D. ‘The doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Abbasid era’ in Lloyd Ridgeon (ed.) *Islamic interpretations of Christianity* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001), 79

[23] Esposito, *Islam: the straight path.*

[24] Louth, Andrew. *St John of Damascus: tradition and originality in Byzantine theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 5

order of Caliph Walīd (r.705-715), the official language of civil administration began to be transferred from Greek to Arabic. Although this transformation would not take place overnight, Christians were quickly becoming aware that to retain or secure a position within the newly Arabicised society, they would need to learn the language of their rulers. Hence Arabic not only became the *lingua franca* of the newly conquered lands, but also the key to social mobility for Christians and Jews.

Towards the end of the Umayyad period, Christians began to be employed as translators, rendering Greek medical works into Arabic, often through the medium of Syriac. As Muslim interest in Greek thought grew, works from almost all Greek disciplines such as philosophy, astronomy, natural sciences, and geography, were translated into Arabic. The ability to carry out these translations seems to have been a skill which was both respected and admired by the Muslim elite. By the period in which the first Arabic-speaking Christians were active, the translation movement was at its height under the Caliph al-Ma'mūn, who oversaw the foundation of the so called 'House of Wisdom' (*bayt al-hikma*) in 830 C.E. Based in Baghdad, the organisation

employed Christians and Muslims from various parts of the empire, in order to translate philosophical and scientific works from Greek into Arabic.[25]

One of the earliest translations of Aristotle's Topics was completed by the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I (c. 740-823), as requested by the Caliph al-Mahdī (r. 775-785). Timothy I is said to have consulted the Christian bureaucrat Abu Nūḥ for help in doing this, which suggests that translation was not yet a professional enterprise. Indeed it seems that most translations came about as a result of wealthy individuals sponsoring those with knowledge of Greek and Arabic to make translations of works concerning not only philosophy but also medicine, astronomy, mathematics and more. The most famous patrons were caliphs; the likes of al-Mahdī (r.775-785), al-Ma'mūn (r.813-833), al-Mu'tasim (r. 833-842) and al-Wāthiq (r. 842-847) are all noted as having sponsored translations. Other patrons included family members of various

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[25] For more on the transmission of Greek thought into Arabic see-Gutas, Dimitri. *Greek thought, Arabic culture: The Graeco-Arabic translation movement in Baghdad and early 'Abbasid society (2nd-4th/ 8th-10th centuries)* (London: Routledge, 1998); and: Endress, G. and Remke, K. *The ancient tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism : studies on the transmission of Greek philosophy and sciences: dedicated to H. J. Drossaart Lulofs on his ninetieth birthday.* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1997)

caliphs, secretaries, courtiers and other officials, all interested in aspects of Greek learning.[26]

During the first quarter of the ninth century, the translation process continued and developed, becoming more of a profession, in the sense that prominent individuals began to be associated with it. These individuals were mainly Syriac speaking Christians with the exception of a few such as ‘Abdullah Ibn al-Muqaffa‘(d.757), a Persian Zoroastrian convert to Islam. The Nestorian Ḥunayn ibn Isḥaq (809-873) and his son Isḥaq ibn Ḥunayn (830-910) are two of the most famous names associated with the translation movement, along with the Melkite physician Qusta ibn Lūqā (820-912), and the Jacobite philosopher Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī (893-974), to name but a few.[27] Ḥunayn, together with his son and nephew are said to have translated most of Aristotle’s works between them, albeit slightly later than our Christian authors are thought to have been writing. Most often translating through the medium of their

[26] Gutas, *Greek thought, Arabic culture*, 121-135

[27] Ḥunayn and his family are often associated with the *bayt al-ḥikma*, (‘House of Wisdom’), which, according to Gutas, was actually a library where translation activity from Persian into Arabic took place, and ‘not a center for the translation of Greek works into Arabic’. Gutas, *Greek thought, Arabic culture*, 53-60

native Syriac, it appears that these translators were forced to go back to the Greek and improve their language skills in order to convey technical and often difficult concepts in Arabic; terminology which would be used by Christians and Muslims alike.[28]

Although the translation of Aristotle's *Topics* by Timothy I appears to have been one of the earliest, it was by no means the only one. 'Abdullah ibn al-Muqaffa undertook the *Categories* amongst his other translations, and his son is also said to have translated it among other pieces for the Caliph al-Manṣūr (754-775).[29] The Muslim philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d. c. 870), whose criticisms of the Trinity will be examined below, made a summary of the *Organon*, whilst some of his companions are said to have produced a summary and commentary relating to the *Categories*; and an overview of *On Interpretation*, among other works of Aristotle.[30]

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[28] Gutas, D. *Greek thought*, 138

[29] Fakhry, Majid. *A history of Islamic philosophy* (New York; London: Columbia University Press, 1970)

[30] 'Arabic and Islamic philosophy of language and logic', *The Stanford encyclopedia of Philosophy*, website available from: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/arabic-islamic-language/?&NMW_TRANS=ext#EarTra; last accessed on 25/02/11

Through the numerous translations into Arabic, carried out mainly by Christian scholars, Aristotle was to become an important figure in Islamic thinking, who came to be referred to as *al-hakīm* or *al-faylasūf* . As Endress puts it:

> '… the undisputed master of philosophy, for the Christian schools of late Hellenism as well as for the Muslim transmitters of this tradition, was Aristotle: founder of the paradigms of rational discourse and of a coherent system of the world.'[31]

As a result of the translation movement, demanded by Muslim rulers and officials, the ready availability of Aristotelian and other philosophical works, combined with the accusation of *taḥrīf* (the falsification or corruption) levelled at Christians by Muslim thinkers, would push Christians to renew their study of Aristotle for the purposes of defending their doctrines according to reason and logic.

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[31] Endress, G. 'The circle of al-Kindī: Early Arabic translations from the Greek and the rise of Islamic philosophy', in G. Endress and K.Remke (eds), *The ancient tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism : studies on the transmission of Greek philosophy and sciences : dedicated to H. J. Drossaart Lulofs on his ninetieth birthday.* (Leiden: Research School CNWS, 1997), 52

1.1.3. Linguistic environment

As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the expansion of the Islamic empire during the seventh century led to the incorporation of a number of indigenous populations including Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and others. The Christians, who remained a majority in these newly conquered lands well into the late ninth century, appear to have spoken and worshipped in a number of different languages, depending mainly on geographic location and ancestry.

Prior to the Islamic conquest, from the patriarchate of Jerusalem out through Palestine and the Transjordan area the dominant language of the intellectual elite and of most of the urban populations of Palestine seems to have been Greek. Greek was certainly the liturgical language of the Melkite church. As one would expect therefore, Greek would also have been the official liturgical language of the monastic communities in Palestine, although Sidney Griffith also presents evidence that where

there were enough monks from other areas who spoke a different language sermons were often provided in their own vernacular.[32]

To the East in Mesopotamia, another form of Aramaic, Syriac, remained the language of the majority. As F. M. Donner puts it:

> 'Even after nearly ten centuries of Greco-Roman culture, the great mass of the Syrian populace remained thoroughly Semitic. Syrians never embraced the Greek tongue or Greek culture to the extent that some other groups…certainly had.' [33]

Following the Council of Chalcedon in 451, which formally set out and ratified the Byzantine expression of the nature of Jesus Christ and the Incarnation, the cultural

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[32] Griffith, S. H. 'From Aramaic to Arabic: The languages of the monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 51, (1997), 13. Irfan Shahid similarly says that: 'Each community celebrated the Mass in its own language from the beginning until the reading of the Gospel, then they all gathered in the Great Church of the Greek-speaking monks and participated in the Sacred Mysteries.' Shahid, Irfan. *Arabs and the Byzantine world in the fifth century* (Washington D.C., 1989), 197
Griffith and others have identified the major vernacular of this region, spoken alongside or instead of Greek, as Christian Palestinian Aramaic (CPA). Whilst CPA used the same script as Syriac, Griffith is careful to point out that it was a distinct language which 'flourished' between the fourth and eighth centuries before being relegated to 'merely a liturgical language'. See also: Balicka-Witakowski, E., Brock, S. and Taylor, D.T.K. (eds) *The hidden pearl: the Syrian Orthodox church and its ancient Aramaic heritage*, (Rome: Transworld film, 2001)

[33] Donner, F.M. *The early Islamic conquests* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), 94

and political divide between the Greek and Syrian churches was deepened by adding a theological dimension. In the west of the Mesopotamian region, it was the Syrian Orthodox Church which became predominant, also often referred to as the 'Jacobite Church' following its structural reorganisation by Jacob Baradaeus in the mid-sixth century. The Church of the East, or 'Nestorian Church' is often misleadingly associated with the teachings of Nestorius. Although it is often recognised and characterised by its split from the western churches in accepting the teachings of Nestorius, which were otherwise condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431, the Church of the East was actually officially constituted following a synod held at Seleucia-Ctesiphon (modern day central Iraq) in 410.[34] Syriac remained the liturgical language of both churches, although missionary efforts, particularly on the part of the Church of the East, led to Christian populations with a varied range of vernaculars becoming a part of these communities.

[34] Hage, W. *Syriac Christianity in the East*. (Kerala, India: SEERI, 1988), 8

Consequently, spoken languages varied from area to area. Most in the Mesopotamian region would probably have spoken a form of Aramaic, with those living further south and in old territories of the Sassanid Empire also speaking Persian. Some communities in the Euphrates valley, which borders the Arabian Peninsula, would have been native Arabic speakers, such as the Christian poet 'Adī ibn Zayd.[35] Indeed there is evidence for Christian Arab tribes from as early as the beginning of the fourth century. An Arab bishop, Pamphilus, attended the Council of Nicea in 325 and another, Theotimus, was present at the Synod of Antioch in 363.[36] Irfan Shahid refers to the three centuries prior to the birth of Islam as 'the golden period of Arab Christianity'.[37] The city of al-Hira, a Christian centre throughout the Byzantine period, sent missionaries to the Arabian Peninsular.[38] Slightly further north, in Baghdad, one finds Christian churches and communities, the majority being East Syrian, some being West Syrian and a small percentage belonging to the Melkite community, who are presumed to have been originally brought to Baghdad as

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[35] Swanson, M. 'Arabic as a Christian language?' Available from: http://www.luthersem.edu/mswanson/papers/Indonesia%20Arabic.pdf; accessed 28/04/08, 1

[36] Shahid, I. *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fourth century*, (Washington D.C., 1984), 330

[37] Ibid., 24

[38] Ibid., 94 n.74

prisoners and slaves.[39] Certainly then, we find a pre-Islamic Christian Arab presence in areas which, under ‘Abbasid rule, would become the heart of the Islamic Empire.

By the time the ‘Abbāsid caliphate became established, moving the central seat of authority from Damascus, via Harran under the first ‘Abbāsid caliph Abū al-‘Abbās al-Saffāḥ (750-754), to Baghdad in 762, Arabic had already begun to replace local languages as the language of trade, government and bureaucracy. Termed the new *lingua franca* in this period, this meant that any Christian who wanted to retain or gain a position within the newly Arabicised society, needed to learn the language of their rulers.

In summary, it is evident that there were a number of languages being written and spoken in the Islamic Empire in the early ninth century. It is likely that Arabic had taken over as the language of trade and administration. In terms of liturgical languages, it would seem that different Christian communities retained their own

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[39] Allard, M. ‘Les chrétiens à Baghdad’, *Arabica* 9, no. 3 (1962)

languages to some extent, but these were beginning to give way to Arabic,[40] depending on the geographic location of a given community, as well as its cultural, ethnic and denominational roots. Regarding spoken languages and dialects, it is almost impossible to be certain and it should not be assumed that official, written, or liturgical languages of a given area necessarily dictate or correspond to spoken dialects. Thus, it is entirely possible that someone like ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, living close to the region of al-Hira, a cultural centre for Arab Christians in pre-Islamic times, and

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[40] Mark Swanson gives examples such as Palestine, where Aramaic gave way to Arabic as early as the eighth century and later Egypt, where Arabic replaced the native Coptic language to such an extent that by 1200 Coptic is described as being ‘practically dead’. (Swanson, M. ‘Arabic as a Christian language’, 5.) Gerhard Endress points to the same two cases, saying that at the turn of the millennium, these two languages were only spoken by a few minorities and learned theologians. (Endress, G*. Islam: an historical introduction*, Carole Hillenbrand (trans.), (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 132.) Sidney Griffith takes up the question of language in the monasteries of Palestine where he tells us that in the eighth and ninth centuries ‘Arabic came to challenge even Greek.’ (Griffith, S. H. ‘From Aramaic to Arabic: the languages of the monasteries of Palestine in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods’, *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, Vol. 51, (1997), 24) He argues that there is enough evidence to suggest that Palestinian monks were both translating from Greek into Arabic and creating original compositions in Arabic from the latter half of eighth century, while there is little or no evidence of significant Greek compositions in the ninth century (28). Griffith also talks of a literary Arabic *koine* that seems to have been a variety of Arabic used by Melkites in the area, consisting of Arabic text in Greek script (29). Joshua Blau also deals with this issue, explaining that this variation of Arabic, which was once thought to be a Palestinian dialect, seems to be better defined as a Melkite dialect, as there is evidence of works written in Melkite communities to the east of Palestine. (Blau, Joshua. ‘A Melkite Arabic literary “lingua franca” from the second half of the first millenium’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, University of London, Vol. 57, No. 1, in honour of J. E. Wansbrough. (1994), 14-16)

being in one of the foremost intellectual centres of Arab Islamic thinking during ‘Abbasid times, would have spoken Arabic as a native language, even if he read or wrote Syriac as a liturgical language. Meanwhile, Abū Qurra, being a bishop of the Melkite Church in Harran, would have likely had a very different linguistic background. The same would also be true of Abū Rā’iṭa, who found himself in the central Mesopotamian city of Takrit around the same time. What is clear, however, is that not long after 800, Christians in various parts of the Islamic empire were writing theology in Arabic. These theological works could and would be read by both Christians seeking to defend their faith and Muslims who were challenging the doctrines and practices of their Christian neighbours.[41]

1.2. Christian theologising on the Trinity

[41] A word might be said here about the Bible in Arabic. The earliest extant translations of the gospel come from the Palestinian Melkite tradition, such as Sinai Arabic MS 151, translated by a man named Bišr al-Sirrī in 867 C.E. (Griffith, S. H. "The Gospel in Arabic: an inquiry into its appearance in the first Abbasid century", *Oriens Christianus 69*, (1985), 131), though there are references to Arabic translations of biblical passages from as early as the mid seventh century, when the Patriarch John I is said to have arranged for a translation of the gospel, at the request of a Muslim official named ‘Amr. [41] ibid., 135

This section looks at the nature of Christian theologising before and shortly after the Islamic conquests specifically in relation to the unity of God, through the use of two individual examples as potential points of reference for later Christian thinkers: one from the Greek tradition, the other from the Syriac.

By the time Muḥammad received his first revelation in 610, Christianity had effectively had a six hundred year "head start" over the youngest of the Abrahamic faiths. As will also be seen in terms of early Islamic thought, theological questions presented themselves as Christians sought to understand their holy scriptures in the context of the world in which they lived. The development of the doctrine of the Trinity, which forms the central motif of this study, arose from the need to synthesise a simple, monotheistic, Jewish-inherited understanding of God with New Testament passages referring to God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The tools, in order to achieve such a feat, would be those borrowed from ancient Greek philosophers and then drawn upon and developed by generations of Church Fathers. Credit is most often given to the Cappadocian Fathers, St. Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus

and Gregory of Nyssa, for refining and settling the doctrine of the Trinity at the Council of Constantinople in 381, although the doctrine remains a highly complicated area of Christian theology to this day.

Although the Trinity came to form a major part of Christian-Muslim debate in the early ninth century, it is important that two points be borne in mind. Firstly, the Trinity would not necessarily have been a central concern in itself for Christians shortly before the rise of Islam. As mentioned previously, the doctrine had been largely settled within the tradition by the end of the fourth century, and the expression of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit as ‘one *ousia* and three hypostases’, would have been accepted in most Christian circles. However, the second point to be noted is that the doctrine of the Trinity cannot be truly separated from the question regarding the status of Jesus as the ‘Son of God’, although an artificial separation has to be made for the purposes of this study. Questions surrounding the Incarnation of Jesus, that is the

manner and mode of his becoming human, dominated the pre-Islamic period and shaped the Eastern churches into the three denominations mentioned above.[42]

Briefly exploring two Christian scholars before and during the very early Islamic period will allow an insight into the nature of Christian theologising before Islam and perhaps something of the intellectual roots of our three Arabic-speaking Christian authors of the early ninth century. The two individuals to be examined are Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbug (c. 440-523), and John of Damascus (c.675-c.754). The former represents the Syriac Christian tradition and the latter the Greek Christian tradition.

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[42] Griffith, S. H. *The church in the shadow of the mosque: Christians and Muslims in the world of Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 130. With Christology being the theological matter which separated the various Christian denominations in the Middle East, the coming of Islam saw Christian churches increasingly define themselves against one another, leading them to write polemical intrafaith works in Arabic such as Abū Rā'iṭa's 'Refutation of the Melkites'. Graf, G. (ed.) *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'iṭa*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Vol. 130 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbeq, 1951)

1.2.1. Philoxenus of Mabbug (d. 523)

Philoxenus of Mabbug was born of Persian parents around the middle of the fifth century and educated in Edessa, before being consecrated in 485. During his time at Edessa, it would seem that Philoxenus experienced many of the ramifications of the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) in terms of divisions between those advocating dyophysite teachings, incidentally shared by both Nestorius and the councils mentioned above, and those opposing them.[43] At some point Philoxenus became a staunch monophysite. He has been described as 'un écrivain d'une grande fécondité'[44] who is credited with representing 'the finest synthesis of the Greek and Syriac intellectual tradition'.[45] Among his extant works we find a treatise on the Trinity

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[43] De Halleux, A. Philoxène de Mabbog : sa Vie, ses Écrits, sa Theologie. (Louvain : Imprimerie Orientaliste, 1963), 25-30. 'Monophysite' and 'dyophysite' are labels most often used by those in opposition to either position. Simply put, 'dyophysite' refers to those who held that Christ has both a divine and human nature, which included those who upheld Chalcedonian orthodoxy such as the Melkites, and also the 'Nestorians', or more properly, those of the Church of the East, although the two churches differed sharply over the relationship of the two natures and the Incarnation. The 'monophysites' included the Syrian Orthodox or West Syrian Church (also commonly known as the Jacobites), who held that Christ has only one nature, that is the divine nature.

[44] Philoxenus. 'Textes inédits de Philoxène de Mabboug', *Le Muséon*, vol.43 (1930), 2

[45] Ferguson, E. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of early Christianity,* 2nd ed., Vol. 2, (New York; London: Garland Publishing Ltd., 1997), 1918

Sebastian Brock describes Philoxenus as 'a particularly useful yardstick' in terms of the transmission of Greek learning into Syriac, referring to him as 'an outstanding representative of the native Syriac

and Incarnation[46] and a confession of faith concerning the Trinity[47], both of which may provide an insight into the sorts of ideas upon which those such as Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār may have been drawing, and also more generally into Christian thought in the East before the birth of Islam.

Whilst his Christological writings came to very much distinguish him as a monophysite thinker, Philoxenus' doctrine of the Trinity remained in line with the confessions of the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. Indeed, by the period in which Philoxenus was writing, the Trinity seems to have been viewed almost as a preliminary doctrine to the explanation of the Incarnation, which had become the primary concern for Eastern Christian thinkers. For Philoxenus, his task seems to have been explaining the Trinity in such a way that the second hypostasis, 'God the

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cultural tradition…who, later in life, openly proclaimed the superiorit of the Greek Bible over the Syriac…' Brock, S. 'From antagonism to assimilation: Syriac attitudes to Greek learning' in S. Brock *Syriac perspectives on late antiquity*, (London: Variorum Reprints, 1984), chap. V, 20.

46 Cf. Vaschalde, A.A. 'Three letters of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbôgh' *(485-519),* Rome, 1902; available from: http://www.ccel.org/ccel/pearse/morefathers/files/philoxenus_three_02_part1.htm; accessed 28/1/11

47 Wallis Budge, E.A. *The discourses of Philoxenus, Bishop of Mabbôgh*, A.D. 485-519, vol. II, London, (Asher and Co., 1894), xxxi-xxxiii

Word' as he refers to it, could become incarnated without undergoing change and without effecting change on the other two hypostases. He therefore, like many Christian thinkers of various denominations, stresses the relative distinction between the hypostases, namely that God begets, the Son is begotten and the Spirit proceeds.

In his treatise on the Trinity and Incarnation, Philoxenus most commonly speaks of 'one nature' and 'three hypostases', the hypostases being the Father, the Son (who he often refers to as 'God the Word') and the Holy Spirit. According to De Halleux, in Philoxenus' works the names 'Son' and 'Word' both designate the hypostases and not the nature directly. 'Son' refers to the action of eternal generation, whilst 'Word' indicates the spiritual and mysterious mode of the generation. The phrase 'God the Word' is used repeatedly by Philoxenus, 'God' referring to the nature and 'Word' to the hypostasis, as distinct from the other two hypostases. His focus always more directed towards the Incarnation, the question of Trinity only really seems to be raised by the accusation of tritheism. The Son is identical to the Father in every

respect, not only in nature but in power, ability to create, will and so on, except that he does not beget. Presumably the same is true of the Spirit. For Philoxenus, the relationship of the hypostases to the nature is that of the particular to the general. The Trinity, as well as an essence, is a single nature, with not only one hypostasis, which amounts to Sabellianism, but with three hypostases that are included in the nature and have names which indicate their respective particular properties, and through whose names the common nature is also indicated.[48] The unity of God is not a numerical unity, it transcends number; a position which would be upheld and emphasised by Christian authors faced with Muslim accusations of tritheism in later centuries.

In Philoxenus' short confession of faith pertaining to the Trinity,[49] the same emphasis on the nature of the Son can be clearly seen. Philoxenus very briefly states that he believes in a Trinity which can neither be added to nor subtracted from, that everything outside it is created, and whatever is within it is eternal. There is no other

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[48] De Halleux, *Philoxène de Mabbog*, 356 n. 22

[49] Wallis Budge The discourses of Philoxenus, xxx1-xxxiii

god outside of the Trinity and no created man within it. This then leads onto the rest of his statement concerning the Incarnation. The Holy Spirit is not mentioned in this brief confession, but elsewhere, as A.A. Vaschalde explains, there are a few statements Philoxenus makes concerning the third member of the Trinity, which point to the equality and consubstantiality of the three hypostases as ratified by the Council of Constantinople.[50]

What this brief insight into a sixth century Syriac approach to the Trinity shows is that long before the coming of Islam, a fairly standard Christian understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity had been established, as basis for development of varying Christologies, which seems to have been the primary concern of Syriac speaking Christians, both Monophysites and Dyophysites alike. These Christological differences would remain well into the Islamic period and would, in fact, define and distinguish the various churches within the empire, and be used in an effort to

[50] Vaschalde, 'Three letters of Philoxenus', sect. 31

commend each particular denomination to Islamic rulers, as noted above.[51] This would suggest that although the Trinity became a central doctrine in Christian thought, it was actually the challenge of Islam which once again brought it to the forefront of discussion as a mystery in itself, almost unconnected with the doctrine of the Incarnation. The likes of Abū Qurra, Abū Ra'iṭa and 'Ammār, would therefore be required to face the challenges of a renewed discussion on the nature and unity of God.

1.2.2. John of Damascus (c.675-c.754)

Whilst Philoxenus is a good example of the Syriac Christian tradition, John of Damascus (c. 676-754) is an even more natural choice as a representative of the Greek tradition. Often labelled the 'last of the church fathers', John lived in Damascus under Islamic rule which had been established little more than thirty years before his birth. John spent the early part of his life working as a member of the financial administration in Damascus, before most likely retreating to the monastery of Mar

[51] Cf. n. 32

Sabas in southern Palestine.[52] As a Melkite, he adhered to the decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, and wrote primarily in Greek. His major work, the so called *Fount of Knowledge* gives not only a presentation of Christian doctrine at that time, drawn from various theologians who preceded him, but also shows his attitude towards Islam. As such, it forms an ideal basis from which to explore the Arabic speaking Christians of the following generation.

The *Fount of Knowledge* is comprised of three major parts: the *Dialectica* (an introduction to logic),[53] *De haeresibus* (*On heresies*),[54] and the *De fide orthodoxa* (*Exposition of the orthodox faith*).[55] The first part is intended to equip the reader with the necessary philosophical tools with which to appreciate the rest of the work and is essentially a summary of Aristotle's *Categories* and the *Isagoge* of Porphyry; the

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[52] Whether John of Damascus was a monk at Mar Sabas is not definitively known. Cf. Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*, 40 n. 50

[53] John of Damascus, *Dialectica*, trans. R. Grosseteste and Owen A. Colligan (New York: Franciscan Institute, 1953)

[54] John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus*, trans. F.H. Chase, *Saint John of Damascus, Writings, The Fathers of the Church* 37, (Catholic University Press: Washington DC, 1958)

[55] John of Damascus, *Exposition of the orthodox faith*, trans. S.D.F. Salmond, *A select library of Nicene and post-Nicene fathers of the Christian church, second series* ; v. 9, (Oxford: J. Parker, 1899)

second concerns various heresies from Platonism to Islam; and the third is a compilation of patristic teachings elucidating the true faith, which is Christianity.

John of Damascus begins the first book of this third part by reminding the reader of the truly transcendent nature of God, and warning that it is dangerous to attempt to dabble in things that are beyond human grasp. He then moves onto proofs of God's existence, that He is one and not many, and that He has a Son (who is his Word) and a Spirit, whom together form the Trinity. For John the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly a key topic in itself, more so than it appeared to be for Philoxenus, as it forms the majority of the first book of John's *Exposition*. In the final chapter of his first book, John rather interestingly discusses the characteristics of the divine nature, as will be seen later on in the present study.

Although God is ultimately unknowable, He did not leave human beings in complete ignorance, John explains. We can gain some knowledge of His nature from His creation and the workings of the natural world, as well as from the scriptures,

prophets and finally through His Son, Jesus Christ. Many things can be faintly perceived by the human mind, but not expressed in appropriate terms, and so must be expressed within the limits of human capability, which is why anthropomorphic terms are often used of God, even though they do not mean the same as when used of humans. He then gives a list of attributes of God, not unlike lists which would have been given by contemporary Muslim thinkers, as will be seen in the following section. At the end of this list he stresses that God is one, that is to say one substance (*ousia*) and three hypostases and gives a concise summary of the doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation in line with the Nicene Creed. After setting out a logical proof for the existence of God and once again stressing His utter transcendence, John gives proofs for the Word and Spirit of God.

The next chapter is a longer one on the Holy Trinity, which John begins with a statement of belief in one God, followed by another list of qualities and attributes and ending with a passage which again echoes the language of the Nicene Creed.[56] Like

[56] John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 6

Philoxenus, John's conception is of a God who has a Word and Spirit which are equivalent to the Son and Holy Spirit, and who, as one godhead have attributes or qualities such as living, knowing and wise which are 'common to whole godhead'.[57]

John uses the analogy of the sun in reference to God to show that together the Son and the Holy Spirit come from the Father and not that the Spirit comes from the Son.[58] He likens this to the *'ray and the radiance'*[59] which come from the sun. The radiance is imparted *through* the ray, and it is that which illuminates us. John, like his predecessors, presents the relationship of the three hypostases as begetter, begotten and one who proceeds. In order to illustrate this he employs the analogy of

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[57] Ibid., 14

[58] Here, John is expressing his stance on what would come to be known as the 'filioque controversy', which would become increasingly important during the ninth century and would come to be a separating factor between the Greek and Latin churches. Photius of Constantinople (c.810-893), who followed in the tradition as those such as John of Damascus and earlier Greek fathers, is often associated with defending the Greek or Eastern conception of the Holy Trinity, which held that the Father alone is the cause of the Holy Spirit, not the Father and Son, as the Latin fathers began to suggest. For the Greek fathers, if the Holy Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son, then it would suggest a diarchy in the godhead and, if common to both the Father and Son then causing the Holy Spirit to proceed must also be common to the Holy Spirit, meaning that the Holy Spirit would be playing a part in his own mode of existence, which is illogical. For more see: Orphanos, M.A. 'The procession of the Holy Spirit according to certain later Greek Fathers' in L. Vischer (ed.) *Spirit of God, spirit of Christ* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1981), 21-45

[59] John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 11

Adam, Eve and Seth, whereby Adam is the begetter, Seth the begotten, and Eve the one who proceeds from Adam's rib. Towards the end of the first book, John once again discusses anthropomorphic terms, claiming that they are symbolic and not to be taken to mean that God has a body, but to be understood metaphorically; for example, His mouth and speech represent His divine Will. John of Damascus' final topic of this first part is that of the divine names and properties of God, which will be further investigated in relation to the Arabic-speaking Christian authors examined in this study.

It would seem then, that in structure, John's work is laid out much like traditional compilations or systematic expositions of earlier church fathers, and yet, one cannot help but notice certain emphases and likely allusions to Islam, which are not found in earlier Christian expositions. To begin with, the organisation of his material in the *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith* reflects the concerns of the Muslim *mutakallimūn*. The doctrine of the Trinity is clarified in Book One over the course of fourteen chapters. The second book deals with the created world and mankind, the third with

the Incarnation, and the final book covers other topics, mostly concerning Christian practices which would have been criticised by his Muslim contemporaries.

Throughout the work, John discusses standard Christian doctrines and topics, but appears to linger over certain concepts, stress certain points or make specific mention of things relevant to a Muslim audience as seen above in relation to what can be known about God. This includes descriptions of God, often pointing to what God is not, and referring to His names and attributes following the line of reasoning that God gave us the faculty of knowledge and therefore man should have a vague notion of Him. At one point John refers to God as both noun and adjective, for example reason and rational, life and living, thus touching ever so slightly upon the grammatical aspect of God's attributes, which was of particular concern to some of his Muslim contemporaries, as will be seen in the following section.

The influence of Muslim concerns on John's writings, however, should not be overemphasised. Many of the issues he treats are traditional Christian ones as well

as Muslim ones, and the evidence, particularly from his *De Haeresibus*, points to his not taking Islam very seriously. Indeed, from his treatment of Islam in the second part of the *Fount of Knowledge* as the most recent in a series of heresies, it is clear that John of Damascus regarded Islam as an aberrant form of Christianity rather than a separate faith.

In John of Damascus, one sees a man of his time and context, who sets out an essentially traditional Christian exposition but with a clear awareness of Islam, shown both through his direct reference to it in the *De haeresibus*, and through subtle allusions to the concerns of his Muslim neighbours in terms of the way he presents his *Exposition*; particularly in the ordering of his material and the emphasis of certain points as noted above. Moreover, as Griffith notes, John was to have a ‘powerful influence on subsequent presentations of Christian theology in Arabic’,[60] as will be seen in the following chapters of this study.

[60] Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*, 41

1.3. Muslim theologising on the nature and unity of God

The establishment and development of Islam, as not only a religious faith but also a comprehensive world view set alongside older religions with competing claims, brought with it a number of questions for the believing people (*al-mu'minīn*). One of the earliest questions concerned the succession of the Caliphs, which became a matter of dispute immediately following the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 632, requiring later caliphs and dynasties to find ways of legitimising their authority. From the very outset then, religious questions became intricately interwoven with political affairs.[61]

On a spiritual level, political divisions, turmoil and conflict led some to question the reasons for this dissension and God's role in it, triggering some of the earliest debates on free will.[62] A number of sects and schools of thought began to emerge as

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[61] Majid Fakhry refers to theology as 'the handmaid of politics', whilst Franz Rosenthal notes that political questions prompted 'deep theological discussions'. Fakhry, Majid. *History of Islamic philosophy*; and Rosenthal, F. *The Classical Heritage in Islam* (Emile and Jenny Marmorstein trans) (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1965)

[62] For a useful introduction to the question of free will in Islam, see: Watt, W.M. *Free will and predestination in early Islam*, (London: Luzac, 1948)

a result of varying positions on such questions, the most famous of whom would come to be known as the Mu‘tazila, who, for a good part of the ninth century, would not only enjoy theological dominance but also political prominence, particularly during the reign of al-Ma’mūn (r. 813-833).

Characterised by the seemingly contradictory attitudes of the promotion of intellectual freedom and a love of foreign learning in contrast to an almost tyrannical demand of allegiance to a particular doctrine, al-Ma’mūn forms a fascinating figure. Amongst other things, the ‘Abbāsid caliph is known for hosting debates between Muslims and representatives of other faiths at his court and for strongly supporting the translation of Greek works into Arabic. Yet what he is known most particularly for is the so-called *miḥna* (inquisition), which he initiated in 833.[63] The *mihna* was carried out to ensure that all Muslim scholars profess the doctrine of the created, as opposed to uncreated and eternal, nature of the Qur’an, a Mu‘tazilī doctrine which arose from the desire to

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[63] For more on the *miḥna*, see: Watt, W.M. *The formative period of Islamic thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998); Gutas, *Greek thought, Arabic culture*; and the theological context: Nader, A. Le système philosophique des Mu‘tazila: Premiers penseurs de l’Islam, (Beirut: Les Lettres Orientales, 1956), 106-113

protect God as the only divine and eternal being. Those who refused to comply were either imprisoned or exiled, most famously Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (780-855), a respected hadith scholar and founder of the Ḥanbalī legal school, who actively opposed Mu'tazilite doctrine.

The reasons for, and aims of, the *miḥna* remain an issue of debate.[64] Whatever the definitive motivation, it is probable that al-Ma'mūn was looking to establish himself firmly as the unchallenged authority on spiritual affairs as well as secular ones. What is particularly noteworthy for the purposes of this study, however, is that the favour bestowed upon the Mu'tazila and the policy which required all Muslims to accept their notion of a 'created Qur'an', meant that for a short time at least, the Mu'tazila enjoyed a 'golden period' of theological and political dominance, which would most likely have had implications on the nature of Christian-Muslim debate during this period. The

[64] For more see: Hurvitz, Nimrod. 'Miḥna as self-defense' *Studia Islamica*, no. 92 (2001), 93-111; Nawas, John A. 'The miḥna of 218 A.H./833 A.D. revisited: An empirical study', *Journal of the American Oriental society*, vol. 116, no. 4 (Oct.-Dec., 1996), 698-708; and _______. A reexamination of three current explanations for al-Ma'mūn's introduction of the miḥna', *International journal of Middle East studies*, vol. 26, no. 4, (Nov., 1994), 615-629

implications of the various contexts acknowledged thus far will be brought together at the end of the present chapter.

For Muslims striving to know something about the nature of God, early questions emerged as a result of the apparent contradiction of a God who is transcendent and incomparable,[65] whilst at the same time one who is described in the Qur'an by a number of positive names ('*asmaa*) or attributes (*sifāt*) suggesting something about His divine nature. These names are given as a list of adjective epithets, such as 'The Compassionate', 'The Merciful', 'The Wise' and so on.[66] The ensuing debate concerned the ontological and semantic status of these attributes and was a debate with which Christian authors defending the Trinity in Arabic would come to engage.

Of the Muslims, those who confirmed the divine attributes to be real, incorporeal and eternal entities alongside God came to be known as 'Attributists', and those who

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[65] Cf. sura 112:4

[66] For a list of the names of Allah see for e.g. al-Bayhaqi, *Allah's names and attributes (al asma' wa al-sifat): Excerpts* (G.F. Haddad trans*.), Islamic doctrines and beliefs*, vol. 4, (Michigan: As-Sunna Foundation of America, 1999)

opposed this view, suggesting that God's attributes were identical with His essence were 'Antiattributists'. Each faced a different problem. For the former mostly traditionalist group, such as followers of Ibn Ḥanbal, reading the Qur'an literally gave rise to the question of how the attributes could be eternal alongside God when the Qur'an clearly states that: *'nothing can be compared with Him* [God]. [67] For the latter group, of which the Mu'tazilites were at the forefront, the supreme uniqueness of God led to the inability to 'know' anything real about Him and subsequently to the question of what these terms or attributes actually meant.[68]

As with the Christian representatives of the previous subsection, it is worth looking at two key figures involved in the attributes debate and their various, and by no means homogenous, ideas concerning the nature and unity of God, because it appears to have been such thinking with which our Christian authors were engaging. The first is the great leader of the Basra school of the Mu'tazila, Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf

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[67] *The Qur'an*, 42:11

[68] The beginning of Al-Ash'arī's account of the Mu'tazila in his *'Maqalat'* gives a useful summary of their beliefs in God's transcendence: al-Ash'arī, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī. *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, H. Ritter (ed.), *Die Dogmatischen Lehren der Anhänger des Islam,* 3rd edition (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1930), 155-156

(d.c.840) and the second is the rather more elusive theologian, Abū Muḥammad ‘Abdallah Ibn Kullāb (d.c.855).

1.3.1. Abū al-Hudhayl (c. 750-c. 840)

Born in around 750 C.E., Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf is classed as one of the earliest and most influential Mu‘tazilite scholars, whose teachings formed the basis for much of the school. He succeeded Ḍirār ibn ‘Amr as chair of the Basrian School, before settling in Baghdad towards the end of his life. Unfortunately, none of Abū al-Hudhayl’s works have survived, although there exists a record of titles of many works written by him, which, along with contemporary works, both of his opponents and students, offer an insight into his teachings and beliefs. From the titles of his works, and works written about him, it can be seen that he acted also as an early apologist for Islam, debating or writing against groups including Dualists, Jews and Christians, including, most significantly for this study, ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī.

Although Abū al-Hudhayl wrote on many interrelated subjects, it is his conception of God which is the most pertinent to this study, and indeed one of his major concerns, being perhaps the first person to carry out a systematic analysis of the Qur'anic passages relating to God's attributes.[69] In his thinking, we are told, the unity, the spirituality and transcendence of God…are carried to the highest degree of abstraction. God is one; he does not resemble his creatures in any respect...'.[70] For Abū al-Hudhayl these qualities of God were absolute and irrefutable, and formed the starting point from which he strived to 'know' God.

Abū al-Hudhayl set out to explain how God's attributes could be identical to His essence, and therefore eternal, whilst remaining 'one'. The formulation he constructed ran as follows:

> 'He [God] is knowing by a knowledge that is He and He is powerful by a power that is He and He is living by a life that is He, and similarly he [Abū al-Hudhayl] speaks of His hearing, His sight, His eternity and His forgiveness and His might and his

[69] Van Ess, Josef. *Theologie und Gesellschaft im. 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra, eine Geschichte des religiösen Denkens in frühen Islam,* vol. 3, (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter,1997), 441

[70] *Abu'l Hudhayl al- 'Allaf*, Encyclopaedia of Islam, CD-ROM Edition v.1.0

exaltedness and his greatness and of the rest of the attributes of his essence, and he used to say: If I said that God is knowing I affirm of Him a knowledge which is God and I deny of God ignorance and I indicate [an object] which is, was, or will be known, and if I said powerful I deny weakness of God and affirm of him a power which is God be he praised and I indicate [an object] which is decreed, and if I said God is living, I affirm of Him life, which is God and deny of God death.'[71]

One could not, therefore, talk of a 'knowledge' which was a distinct entity separate from God yet found within Him, one must instead say that 'knowledge' is His essence; or as van Ess puts it, '…daβ Gott ein Wissen hat, aufgrund dessen er wissend ist; nur ist dieses Wissen nichts Separates, sondern mit ihm identisch.'[72]

Thus in Abū al-Hudhayl's conception, the phrase 'God is knowing' came to imply the following: Firstly, that God has a 'knowledge' which is He; secondly that 'ignorance' is implicitly and equally denied of God; and finally that there exists or has existed an

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[71] Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt,* 165.5-165.11

[72] Van Ess, Josef. *Theologie und Gesellschaft,* vol. 1, 272 ('…that God has a knowledge from which he is knowing, only this knowledge is not something separate, but something that is identical to Him')

object which is ‘known’. Ontologically speaking, Abū al-Hudhayl seems to have felt that, in order for humans to be able to say something positive about God, they must be able to distinguish between attributes, though the reality was that each attribute was God himself and could not be separated or distinguished from him.

Meanwhile, it is clear that his younger contemporary, Abū Isḥāq Ibrahīm ibn Sayyār al-Naẓẓām (d.c.836-845), does not use the noun form ‘knowledge’, ‘power’ or ‘life’ at all. He expresses God’s attributes as follows:

> ‘…the meaning of my saying knowing is the affirmation of His essence and the negation of ignorance of Him and the meaning of my saying powerful is the confirmation of His essence and the negation of weakness of Him and the meaning of my saying living is the confirmation of His essence and the negation death of Him…’[73]

Contemporaries were quick to point out the obvious paradox such formulae caused. If the attributes were identical to God, then how was it possible to distinguish between them, or why would they need different names, such as ‘knowledge’ and

[73] Al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt,* 166.16-167.2

'life', if they were identical to Him and presumably therefore to each other as well?[74] Abū al-Hudhayl's answer was that they could be distinguished by the various objects of the attributes, i.e. what is 'known', what is 'willed' and so on. However, this answer was still not sufficient for his critics, as to begin with, the objects of Godly omnipotence and Godly knowledge, to give just one example, are the same, and secondly, not all of the attributes discussed could take an object. This was true for attributes such as 'Life' and 'Eternity'.[75]

There is no doubt that Abū al-Hudhayl's conception of the divine attributes posed as many questions as it answered. Nevertheless, his teaching certainly formed the basis for those who followed him, whether their reaction to him was positive or

[74] There is an interesting parallel to be found here as regards Plotinus' thinking. John Bussanich writes: '…But how can the doctrine of simplicity and aseity be consistent with the attribution of many properties to the One? Granted that the properties of goodness and formlessness, say, are predicated of the One without introducing complexity into its nature, should we conclude that as a property simplicity is identical with goodness, or with infinity, or, generally, that the One's attributes are all the same or are mutually entailing?' Bussanich, John. 'Plotinus' metaphysics of the One' in Lloyd P. Gerson, ed., *The Cambridge companion to Plotinus* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43-44

[75] Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, III, 272-273

negative. His ideas would be reformulated and refined by those who followed him and rejected or actively refuted by others, both Muslim and Christian.

1.3.2. Ibn Kullāb (d.c.855)

Somewhere between the staunch scriptural loyalty of traditional thinkers and the abstract philosophical reasoning of more 'rational' minds, another strand of thought can be identified, one most often attributed to Ibn Kullāb. Like his Mut'azilī contemporaries, little is known about him, though it is thought he was educated in Basra and followed theologically in the tradition of the Mu'tazilite al-Ḥusayn ibn Muḥammad al-Najjār.[76] However, it would appear that Ibn Kullāb pulled further and further away from Mu'tazili thinking as his thinking developed, and came to play an important role in shaping the course of Islamic thinking, by using reason-based arguments and logical principles in order to defend his conservative beliefs.[77] This

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[76] Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, IV, 180-181

[77] Ibn Kullāb was particularly involved in the debate over the created nature of the Qur'an, which was the doctrine on which the Caliph al-Ma'mūn based his 'inquisition' or *mihna*. The tenth century Ash'arite theologian, al- Baqillānī (d. 1013) says that Ibn Kullāb refused to go to al-Ma'mūn's court as

adoption of the ‘rationalist’ methodology of those such as the Mu‘tazila, in order to defend more tradition or orthodox beliefs, is a point often made in connection with the later Ash‘arites, named after the former Mu‘tazilite Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn Ismā‘īl al Ash‘arī, who, at the end of the ninth century, is said to have renounced his Mu‘tazilī beliefs in order to champion Sunni orthodox. The roots of Ash‘arite thinking, however, can be found in the teachings of the followers of Ibn Kullāb, the Kullābiya or ‘*mutakallimūn min al-salaf*’,[78] as they were also known. The eleventh century historiographer, al-Shahrastānī, wrote in his *Nihayat al-aqdam fī 'ilm al-kalām*, that some of his school considered Ibn Kullāb a spiritual father.[79]

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he considered the caliph a sinner, whilst al-Baghdādī (d. 1037) claims that he defeated the Mu‘tazilites in front of the Caliph. Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, IV, 180. See also: Ess, J. van ‘Ibn Kullāb’ und die Mihna, *Oriens*, vol. 18. (1965-66) 92-142. Ibn Kullāb is also credited with building upon the concept of ‘*kasb*’, that is to say the ‘acquisition’ of actions by men from God, in terms of discussions concerning free will.

78 Ess, ‘Ibn Kullāb’ und die Mihna, 97

79 Tritton, A.S. ‘Review of A. Guillaume (ed.) Al-Shahrastani, *Summa Philosophae’*. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*, Vol. 6, No. 4, (1932), 1021

Whilst Abū al-Hudhayl taught that God's attributes are identical to His Essence, Ibn Kullāb's view was that God's attributes subsisted in His Essence, but that they were neither God nor other than God.

> And he used to say: the meaning of God is knowing is that He has a knowledge and the meaning of He is powerful is that He has a power and the meaning of He is living is that He has a life and likewise is the teaching on the rest of His names and attributes. He [Ibn Kullāb] used to say that the names of God and his attributes of His essence were not God and not other than Him, and that they exist because of God, it is not conceivable that the attributes exist in by virtue of the attributes… and he used to say that… His essence [it] is He, and His soul [it] is He and that He exists not by an [attribute] of existence… and that [the attribute of] knowledge is not [the attribute of] power and not other than it, and likewise each attribute of the essential attributes is not the other attribute, and not other than it.[80]

Whereas for the Mu'tazila, God is knowing by virtue of His Essence or Himself, for Ibn Kullāb he is knowing by virtue of knowledge which is not identical to Him nor

[80] al-Ash'ari. *Maqālāt,* 169.10-170.3

other than Him; but He still has a real attribute of knowledge. These statements would lead later Mu‘tazilī thinkers, such as ‘Abd al-Jabbār, to accuse the Kullābiyya of saying that God has three eternal essences, which amounts to polytheism, and makes them guilty of a similar error to the Christians.[81] Moreover, a reference in the ‘*Fihrist’* of the Muslim bibliographer Ibn al-Nadīm (d.c. 995) speaks of a Christian man named Pethion who lived in Baghdad, and claimed that he and Ibn Kullāb would often sit together and talk. Pethion is quoted as saying: ‘God have mercy on ‘Abdallah, he came to me and sat beside me in the cloister, pointed in the direction of the church, and took this saying from me. Had he lived we would have triumphed over the Muslims.’[82] It is not surprising therefore, that Ibn Kullāb was accused of being a Christian by some of his Muslim opponents. What is potentially surprising however, is that it was much of Ibn Kullāb's thinking and methodology that laid the groundwork for what would become Islamic orthodoxy in the hands of al-Ash‘arī and his followers in the tenth century.

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[81] Thomas, D. (ed.) *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology. History of Christian-Muslim relations*, vol. 10, (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 240

[82] M. Rida-Tajaddud (ed.), Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist* (Tehran: Maktabat al-AsadI, 1971), 230

1.3.3. Nature of *kalām*

Both Abū al-Hudhayl and Ibn Kullāb, despite their different viewpoints, can be called *mutakallimūn,* that is to say those who engaged in the *'ilm al-kalām* (science of *kalām*). The word *kalām* literally means 'speech' or 'discourse', and referred from the very beginnings of Islam to discussion on theological matters, changing over time to denote a more organised system or science of speculative theology. The term *kalām* will be translated here as 'Islamic theological thought', though academic debate continues as to the origins, nature and definition of the concept.

The major problem in pinning down the nature of *kalām*, especially in the early ninth century when the development of Islamic thinking can be seen to be in its most formative and volatile stage, is precisely that its nature would have changed over time and from place to place, and it would have almost undoubtedly have been understood differently by different individuals or groups of thinkers. Indeed, even

amongst those who came to be known as Mu‘tazilites, some of the main proponents of *kalām*, one finds a number of different epistemologies and preoccupations.[83]

During a conference held in Boston, Massachusetts in 1973,[84] Josef van Ess presented a paper entitled ‘The Beginnings of Islamic Theology’, which dealt with the *‘ilm al-kalām* and led to a fascinating discussion concerning its definition and origins, also published at the end of the paper.[85] Van Ess himself explained that he was more concerned with the origins of the term,[86] whereas others were interested to know more about what *kalām* actually was in terms of its nature.

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[83] See for example: Al-Ash’arī’s *Maqālāt* and Ess’ *Theologie und Gesellschaft*.

[84] Murdoch, J. E. and Sylla, E.D. (eds) *The cultural context of medieval learning: Proceedings of the first international colloquium on philosophy, science and theology in the Middle Ages*. (Boston, USA: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1975)

[85] Ibid.,104-111

[86] The origins of *kalām* are not the central concern here and require a fuller treatment than this study will allow, however a brief overview may be given here. In his paper entitled, ‘Origins of kalām’, M.A. Cook points to Christian Syriac works to highlight examples of dialectical arguments which he feels Muslim theologians later borrowed. Cook, M.A. ‘The origins of “kalām”’, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 43, No. 1.(1980), 32-43
Wolfson, in his paper on ‘The Muslim Attributes and the Christian Trinity’ sets out to show how this belief in the attributes of God came from contact with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, using mainly terminological evidence and the ruling out of other influences, at least initially (Wolfson, *The philosophy of the kalam*, 1976). The extent of Wolfson’s view is contested, in part at least, by scholars such as Richard M. Frank, who claims that there was no equivalent term in Greek or Latin to the Arabic word *ṣifa*, which means ‘attribute’. (Frank, *Beings and their attributes*, 1978) Josef van Ess

Three suggested definitions presented themselves during the course of the discussion: *kalām* as polemics, *kalām* as theology and *kalām* as a dialectical structure. Each was dismissed individually as not being encompassing enough, and that each can only be said to be an aspect of the discipline.

Richard Frank has written widely on *kalām* and the Mu'tazila in particular and defends the view that *kalām* is theological science. In a review of Michel Allard's book on the divine attributes in Ash'arite thinking,[87] Frank criticises Allard for implying that *kalām* is little more than 'an art of contradiction-making'.[88] Elsewhere, he

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makes the observation that 'Die Muslime selber sagen von einem christlichen Einfluβ nichts…' (Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft,* Band IV,1997, 431) but does recognise that Christian thinking did influence Islamic thought, though perhaps not to the degree that Wolfson suggests. Van Ess also offers evidence of the beginnings of *kalām* in the first Islamic century, that is to say before 750 C.E.[86] Similarly, Sidney Griffith accepts traces of Greek and Christian thought in the development of Islamic theology but refers to it as 'recognizably and uniquely Islamic, and distinctly non-Christian in its thought, format and style.' William Montgomery Watt sees the rise of *kalām* as a reaction to 'tensions within the community of Muslims' and sums up the stance of many scholars quite concisely: 'Muslim theologians did not simply copy Christian ideas, but it is possible that a man might adopt a Christian idea if it fitted into his arguments against Muslim rivals.' Watt. W. M. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: An Extended Survey*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), 50

[87] Allard, Michel. *Le problème des attributes divins dans la doctrine d'al-Ash'ari et de ses premiers grands disciples*. (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1965)

[88] Frank, R.M. 'The kalām, an art of contradition-making or theological science? Some remarks on the question' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 88 (1968)

discusses *kalām* as metaphysics[89], as a theology which dealt with a wide range of philosophical problems,[90] as a particular kind of rational exposition or discourse,[91] and as a discipline having a number of topics which are 'properly considered to be the subjects of *kalām*'.[92] He describes the main function of *kalām* being: '… to rationalise the basic beliefs of the Muslims as they are given in the Koran and the Sunna and are present in the way these are read and understood by orthodox believers.'[93]

Kalām, therefore, appears to be a fundamentally theological enterprise, but one which has distinct philosophical elements. Indeed, Frank suggests, *kalām* actually seems to have perceived itself to be a 'strictly philosophical metaphysics'[94] although in reality this was not the case.

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89 Frank, Richard M. 'The science of Kalām' in *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, 2 (1992), 14

90 Ibid, 16

91 Ibid, 20

92 Ibid., 12

93 Ibid., 22

94 Ibid., 36

David Thomas, from various Islamic theological works he has edited,[95] sees the method of the *mutakallimūn* as being based on common sense logic rather than philosophical premises. Certainly the few extant ninth century Muslim works attacking the Trinity, among other doctrines, do so on the basis of the fundamental premise that one cannot be three and three cannot be one.

In an examination of the development of Muslim theology during the early centuries, Thomas sums up concisely:

> 'It follows that kalām comprises a great deal more than apologetic. Even in the relatively restricted parts brought into discussions connected with anti-Christian

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[95] See, for example: Thomas, D. *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology. History of Christian-Muslim relations*, vol. 10, (Leiden: Brill, 2008); 'A Mu'tazili Response to Christianity: Abu 'Ali al-Jubba'I's Attack on the Trinity and Incarnation', *Studies on the Christian Arabic Heritage*, R. Ebied and H. Teule (Leuven; Paris; Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2004); *Anti-Christian polemic in early Islam: Abū Īsā al-Warrāq's 'Against the Trinity'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); and 'The doctrine of the Trinity in the early Abbasid era' in L. Ridgeon (ed.) *Islamic interpretations of Christianity* (Richmond: Curzon, 2001)

attacks it can be seen to extend towards a comprehensive description of the distinctively Islamic teaching about the oneness of God…'[96]

This common-sense logical approach is illustrated by the few extant Muslim works of the ninth century which deal with the Trinity. In particular, the *Refutation of the Trinity* by the Muslim philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (c.800- c.870) provides an excellent insight into the sort of challenge with which Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār might have been dealing, and adds a further dimension to the fabric of Islamic theological thought in the ninth century.

1.4. Muslim criticisms of the doctrine of the Trinity: Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī

Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī, who is often hailed as the 'philosopher of the Arabs', was also active during the ninth century, though was perhaps a generation younger than Abū al-Hudhayl and Ibn Kullāb. Although considered a philosopher (*faylasūf*), he lived

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[96] Thomas, D. *Anti-Christian polemic in early Muslim theology*, unpublished thesis, (University of Lancaster, 1983), 351

during a period when the intellectual disciplines of *kalām* and *falsafa* were in their infancy and the lines between them very much blurred. As such, al-Kindī argued for the compatibility of philosophy and religion and shared some doctrines with those who were becoming known as representatives of Mu'tazilī thinking. He distinguished 'theology' and 'the science of the unity of God' as divisions of philosophy,[97] and in many respects looked to support the truth of Qur'anic revelation in a similar way to the *mutakallimūn*. For him, both philosophy and religion dealt with the unity of God. The essential difference, whether conscious or subconscious, was one of emphasis and priority, whereby al-Kindī appears to have held philosophy in higher esteem than religion, as his search for truth is largely based on Aristotle. However, in terms of the treatment of the Trinity, it would appear that he attacks the doctrine largely from a basis of common sense logic as much as philosophical premise.

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[97] Atiyeh, G. N. *Al-Kindi: the philosopher of the Arabs*, (Islamabad: The Islamic Research Institute, 1967) 20

In his *Refutation of the Christians,*[98] al-Kindī's opening statement claims that, following the logic of Christian teachings, there is a manifest composition within the godhead. This is because, although Father Son and Holy Spirit are recognised as one substance, they are each said to have a property (*khaṣṣa*) which distinguishes or particularises them from each other.[99] This basic notion, that the Christian description of God entails a necessary plurality in godhead, remains the cornerstone of all of his subsequent arguments. His refutation, like other Muslim works available to us,[100] gives what appears to be a typical description of Christian beliefs, saying that Christians recognise 'three eternal hypostases (*aqānīm*) which do not cease to be one substance, and by hypostases they mean individuals (*ashkhāṣṣ*).'[101]

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98 The treatise is preserved in a work by the Jacobite Christian Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (893-974) who refutes al-Kindī's criticisms of the doctrine of the Trinity. See: Périer, A. (ed. and trans.) 'Un traité de Yahyā ben 'Adī: défense du dogme de la trinité contre les objections d'al-Kindī', in R. Graffin (ed) *Revue de l'orient Chrétien*, vol. 2, no. 22 (1920)

99 Périer, A. 'Un traité de Yaḥyā ben 'Adī', 4

100 See for example: Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq in Thomas, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* , 66-68; 'Abd al-Jabbār in Thomas, *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology,* 228-230

101 Périer, A. 'Un traité de Yaḥyā ben 'Adī', 4

In his second argument al-Kindī calls on the 'rules of logic' and the 'incontrovertible notions' as found in Greek philosophical works such as Porphyry's *Isagoge*,[102] which is an introduction to the Aristotelian *Categories*. Here, he uses the Aristotelian categories to discuss whether the hypostases can be classified as genera (*ajnās*), species (anū/wā') or individuals (*ashkhāṣṣ*), noting that the genus is one genus [comprised] of species and the species is a species [comprised] of individulals.[103] For al-Kindī, each of these categories implies composition as both genus and species include sub categories, and individuals are associated with accidents and can be counted. He later also refers to the same categories in the framework of Aristotle's *Topics* in order to show how each involves multiplicity. Essentially, however one refers to the three hypostases, al-Kindī argues, one is forced to imply that there are three eternal beings which destroys the unity of God.

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[102] ibid., 6

[103] ibid., 6-7. A discussion of these classifications is also found in Abū Ra'iṭa, who argues that Muslims mistake Christian teachings of God's oneness as a numerical oneness. Cf. Chapter 3

Al-Kindī's refutation, therefore, makes reference to philosophical notions, particularly the Aristotelian categories which the Christians themselves use to describe the unity of God, and which al-Kindī argues cannot be applied to God. At the same time, all of his arguments also rest on common sense logic and the apparent impossibility of one being three and three being one, in a way not at all dissimilar from the earlier Muslim scholar, Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq.

A further interesting point to be made about Al-Kindī, which again can also be said of other Muslim polemicists of the ninth and tenth centuries, is that he appears to know a lot about Christian doctrine, but only discusses issues which are in direct contradiction with his own faith, namely the Trinity and Incarnation.[104]

From this brief overview of al-Kindī's criticisms of the doctrine of the Trinity, it is clear that Muslim polemicists were highly critical of doctrine of Trinity, and attacked it

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[104] Thomas, D. 'The Bible and the kalām', in D. Thomas (ed.) *The Bible in Arab Christianity*, (Leiden: Brill, 2007) 176-7. This treatment of Christian doctrine as an aberration of Muslim teaching, to be understood and rejected in terms of the logic of Islamic thinking as opposed to being treated within its own conceptual framework, had an important bearing on Christian Muslim engagement, which will be considered in the final discussion of the present study in Chapter 6.

primarily through the use of common sense logic, based on the fundamental notion that one cannot be three and three cannot be one. It would appear, from extant Muslim refutations such as al-Kindī's, that Christians were being pressured to respond to such refutations of their doctrines. These were the sorts of criticisms, therefore, that Theodore Abū Qurra, Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'iṭa, and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī would need to consider and address when writing their respective works concerning the Trinity. It is to these three authors that we now turn.

CHAPTER 2: THEODORE ABŪ QURRA (c.750-c.820)

2.1. Background

2.1.1. Biography

Of the three authors examined in this thesis, Theodore Abū Qurra is by far the most well known. Of a number of works written in Greek, Syriac and Arabic, there are twenty four which are relevant to Christian-Muslim relations and which are extant today.[105] Although a relatively good amount of information concerning Abū Qurra's thinking can be gleaned from primary and secondary sources, surprisingly little is actually known about his life. As such, his dates of birth and death can still only be imprecisely estimated from references to him in other sources. What is known almost certainly however, is that he was born in Edessa and was the Bishop of Harran for some part of his life. The latter of these two facts is attested to both in the titles of his own works and elsewhere. The Syrian Orthodox or 'Jacobite' theologian Abū Rā'iṭa

[105] Thomas, D. and Roggema, B. (eds) *Christian Muslim relations. A bibliographical history. Vol. 1 (600-900).* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 440-491

al-Takrītī (c.755-835) names Abū Qurra, Bishop of Harran[106] as his interlocutor in the 'Refutation of the Melkites' which he wrote against the Melkite theologian.[107] Somewhere between 813 and 817, Abū Rā'iṭa sent his relative Nonnus of Nisibis to debate with Abū Qurra in the presence of the Armenian Prince Ashūt Msaker (d. 826),[108] a debate which Nonnus is reported to have won.[109] He also appears to have been known in Muslim sources. In Ibn al-Nadīm's *Fihrist*, Abū Qurra is referred to as the 'the Melkite Bishop of Harran'[110], and later on in the same work, he is mentioned in the title of a work attributed to the Baghdadī Mu'tazilite Abū Mūsā 'Īsā ibn Ṣubayḥ al Murdār, 'The book against Abū Qurra the Christian'.[111] In around the year 812-13 it appears that Theodore was dismissed from his post as Bishop of Harran by Theodoret, the then Patriarch of Antioch, though this information is based on a single

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[106] Graf, G. (ed.) *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'iṭa*, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium* Vol. 130 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbeq, 1951), 65

[107] Ibid., 105-30

[108] Ibid., 66

[109] Griffith, S. 'The apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis', *Aram*, vol. 3, no. 1 and 2, (1991), 116 n. 6

[110] Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist*, 26.15. The name Abū 'izza (ابو عزة) is generally accepted to be a scribal error which should read Abū Qurra (ابو قرة), based on the consequent statement about him being the Melkite Bishop of Harran, which is attested to in other sources.

[111] Ibid., 207.6

source.[112] He is thought to have died in the 830s, as the last known reference to him concerns a debate with the Caliph al-Ma'mūn in Harran in the year 829.[113] From the more secure dates available, it would be reasonable to estimate that Theodore Abū Qurra was born in or shortly after the middle of the eighth century, as he was of an age to be appointed Bishop in the early ninth century and took part in the aforementioned debate in 829. It would therefore also be logical to assume that he died soon after this date, as he would have been of a mature age by this point.

Traditionally, Abū Qurra has been thought to have been a monk at Mar Sabas monastery in Palestine for some portion of his life, but a recent study by John Lamoreaux has suggested that there is not enough evidence to justify such a claim.[114] He asserts that the evidence that does exist is questionable in terms of reliability, and he also points to the absence of sources that explicitly name him a

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112 Chabot, J.B. (ed. and trans.) *Chronique de Michel le Syrien, Patriarche Jacobite d'Antioche, 1166-1199*, vol. 3 (Paris : Ernest Leroux, 1905), 32

113 Griffith, Sidney Harrison. *The church in the shadow of the mosque: Christians and Muslims in the world of Islam* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008), 61

114 Lamoreaux, J. 'The biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah revisited', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 56, (2002), 25-40.

monk at Mar Sabas, when many sources refer to him as the Bishop of Harran. Lamoreaux's argument is a persuasive one. The major implication of this re-evaluation is that Abū Qurra would not have been a direct pupil of John of Damascus, as is traditionally thought, though in any case this claim is troublesome chronologically, as John of Damascus is thought to have died in 749. Additionally, if Lamoreaux's thesis is to be accepted, one has to root Abū Qurra more firmly in the historical and intellectual context of Harran than in Jerusalem. That is not to suggest, however, that our perceptions of Abū Qurra need change too dramatically. He was obviously acquainted with John of Damascus' thought, and could well have been a student of John's works and teachings, without being directly acquainted with him. Furthermore, in the introduction to a letter written to David the Monophysite, Abū Qurra himself explains that he spent some time in Jerusalem, where he met the aforementioned David.[115]

[115] Lamoreaux, J. C. 'The biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah revisited', *Dumbarton Oaks Papers*, vol. 56, (2002), 34

2.1.2. Historical Context

Despite discrepancies concerning Abu Qurra's biography, there is enough information to confidently locate him in the early ninth century, based in the city of Harran with probable links to Jerusalem.

Located in the southern region of modern day Turkey, Harran lies little more than thirty miles from the city of Edessa and not far from the Patriarchate of Antioch. Famed as the home of Abraham on his way from Ur to Canaan, Harran was a city of significance for all three of the monotheistic faiths which included him in their histories, that is to say Judaism, Christianity and Islam. They, however, were not the only traditions present in this area. There were also Sabians there, a pagan sect which had been prominent in Harran for a number of centuries and which had prompted the church fathers to refer to Harran as the "heathen city".[116]

[116] Van Ess, J. *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, II, 443

The city's proximity to the theological schools of Edessa and Nisibis is also of significance. As described in chapter one of this study, from about the fifth century the area became a focal point of disagreement between those who rejected and those who accepted 'Nestorian' teachings concerning the divine and human natures of Jesus. As a Melkite, then, Theodore Abū Qurra would have most likely been outnumbered by his Christian neighbours of other denominations, particularly those of Syrian Orthodox persuasion, who appear to have been the majority in that area. Certainly this picture of his historical situation corresponds with his vigorous efforts to commend Melkite doctrine as the correct Christian teaching.

In 750 the first 'Abbāsid caliph, Abū al-'Abbās al-Saffāḥ (r.750-754), moved the seat of power from Damascus to Harran, most likely shortly before Abū Qurra's birth. Although there are few notable Muslim individuals or sects associated particularly with Harran, as most who would be prominent during Abū Qurra's career were to be found further south in the vicinity of Baghdad and Basra, he would nevertheless have been familiar with Muslim thought. In the first two centuries after the coming of Islam,

some of the names associated with the area include Ja‘d ibn Dirham[117] and Abū ‘Amr Sālīm ibn ‘Aghlān al-Afṭas[118] who are linked with the Qadarites and the Murji'a respectively; sects which to an extent laid the groundwork for Mu‘tazilī thinking. Meanwhile, the 'Hanifites of Harran', a pagan sect with whom Muḥammad is said to have been in contact[119], also appear to have been a significant presence in the area and, despite essentially being regarded as pagans, are said to have emphasised the divine transcendence of God through the use of negative theology, and to have understood the meanings of the "beautiful names" of God to be metaphorical, [120] thus advocating an anti-anthropomorphist position not dissimilar to that of the Mu‘tazila.

Whether or not there were many Mu‘tazilī thinkers in Harran itself, it is likely that Theodore would have come across such thought through correspondence with leading Muslim thinkers; for example we know that the "monk of the Mu‘tazila", ‘Īsā ibn Sābih al-Murdār (d.840), wrote a treatise against Abū Qurra, although there is no

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[117] ibid., 449-458

[118] Ibid., 458-9

[119] Ibid., IV, 397

[120] Ibid., 444

evidence of the latter writing a response. Nevertheless, the fact that Abū Qurra was known to prominent Islamic scholars suggests that he may also have been aware of them. Moreover, his debate with and in the presence of the Caliph al-Ma'mūn in 829 would have brought him into direct contact with Mu'tazilite thinking, as we know the Caliph was a great supporter of the school. Theodore's works, some of which will be explored in due course, clearly demonstrate an awareness of his Islamic intellectual surroundings.

In 762, the second 'Abbāsid caliph, al-Mansūr (r. 754-775), relocated to Baghdad, which became the new centre of imperial power and would remain so until the mid-thirteenth century. The effects of this move are well summed up by Griffith:

> 'Syria/Palestine, and especially Jerusalem, which had been an important and religious center of the burgeoning Islamic culture for almost a century under the Umayyads, became a venerated but neglected, provincial backwater in the early Abbasid caliphate.'[121]

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[121] Griffith, S. 'Byzantium and the Christians in the world of Islam: Constantinople and the church in the Holy Land in the ninth century', *Medieval Encounters* 3 (1997), 233

This shift of the capital of the Islamic Empire cannot have been insignificant for Theodore. Having been born in what was the capital of the Empire, he would have found himself fairly far removed from the new political and intellectual centres of Baghdad and Basra at the time that he would have been composing his numerous theological works. This geographical factor may well have contributed to the subtle differences which will be seen between his writings on the Trinity and those of his Jacobite and Nestorian contemporaries, and as such will be explored further in Part Two of the present study.

A word should be said here concerning the identity of the Melkite Church. Of the three major Christian denominations in the Middle East, the Melkite Church was the last to form its distinct identity, which has a lot to do with the specifically Islamic context in which it found itself from the middle of the seventh century onwards. Theologically speaking, of course, those who came to be known as Melkites were defined by their recognition of the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon in 451, and therefore their loyalty to the creeds of the Byzantine Church. However, their labelling

as ‘Melkite’ comes from a later period. Indeed, the term ‘Melkite’, or in Arabic *malakiyya*, based on the Syriac and Arabic root ‘m-l-k’, means ‘royalists’, i.e. those loyal to the Byzantine Emperor. During the period of Byzantine rule over Palestine/Syria, those who professed the Chalcedonian faith enjoyed a privileged position with respect to other denominations, who were frequently persecuted. The dawn of the Islamic Empire brought about the relegation of the Melkites to a denomination like any other: in the Qur’an both Jews and Christians were considered equal as ‘People of the Book’ (*ahl al-kitāb*).

Therefore, although doctrinally aligned with Rome and Constantinople, the combined effects of being within the Islamic Empire both geographically and politically, of gradually moving away in a cultural and linguistic sense, and being directly theologically challenged by Islam and Islamic concerns, led to the almost complete severance of the Melkites from the Byzantine Church over the course of the ensuing

centuries and the development of a distinct denominational heritage within the Islamic Empire.[122]

2.1.3. Intellectual Context

Whether or not Abū Qurra was a monk at Mar Sabas, it is known that he travelled to Jerusalem[123] and that he was familiar with the works of John of Damascus. He followed in the latter's footsteps as a staunch supporter of the Chalcedonian creed, a defender of the veneration of icons and an apologist for the Christian faith in the context of the Islamic Empire.[124] Although also able to read and write in Greek and Syriac, Theodore wrote mainly in Arabic and more consciously reflected his Islamic surroundings than John of Damascus. There is no doubt he viewed Christians of

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[122] See: Griffith. 'Byzantium and the Christians'

[123] In a letter to David the Monophysite, Abū Qurra speaks of them praying together in Jerusalem. Lamoreaux, 'The biography of Theodore Abū Qurrah revisited', 34

[124] See: Dick, I. 'Un continateur arabe de saint Jean Damascène : Theodore Abuqurra, évêque melkite de Harran, La personne et son milieu', *Proche-Orient Chretien*, vol. 13, (1963), 114-129 ; Griffith, S.H. '"Melkites", "Jacobites" and the christological controversies in Arabic in the third/ninth century Syria' in D. Thomas (ed) *Syrian Christians under Islam, the first thousand years* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2001), 38ff.

other denominations alongside Sabians and Manicheans as heretics, and wrote and spoke against the other Eastern churches, particularly the Jacobites.[125] How he regarded Islam is a question which will be explored during the course of this study, but it is sufficient to say here that he appears to have taken Islam more seriously than did John of Damascus, presumably as the consolidation of Islamic rule took place from one generation to the next.

Among the issues which concerned Melkite theologians at the time were both the need to uphold Byzantine orthodoxy against the Syrian Orthodox Church and Church of the East, and the defence of icons[126]. One of Theodore's central concerns, aside from interfaith polemic with Muslims and Jews, was clearly engaging in *intra-Christian* polemic, in order to prove the truth of Melkite doctrine. The need to defend the Melkite Church became more important following the establishment of the Islamic

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[125] See for example: his debate with Nonnus of Nisibis in front of Ashūt Msker in Griffith, S. 'The apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis'.

[126] The defence of icons appears to have been a fairly prominent concern of Abū Qurra following problems within his see of Harran. Griffith, '"Melkites", "Jacobites" and the christological controversies, 32

See also: Griffith, S.H. (ed., trans.) *Theodore Abū Qurra. A treatise on the veneration of the holy icons*, Eastern Christian texts in translation; vol. 1, (Louvain: Peeters, 1997)

Empire in previously Byzantine areas, which led to the elimination of the privileged position of the Melkites with respect to other Christian denominations. Not surprisingly therefore, we find, amongst Theodore's works in Arabic and Greek, those directed at the Nestorians and Jacobites, and those which clearly seek to commend Chalcedonian orthodoxy.[127]

In terms of the Islamic intellectual context, the two most substantive testaments to his engagement with Islam include: the work written against him by Ibn al-Murdār and a report of a debate held at the court of al-Ma'mūn.[128] Wilferd Madelung also suggests similarities between the theological approach of Abū Qurra and that of the Zaydī Imām al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (785-860) ,[129] although the latter lived in Medina and so direct contact would have been unlikely, and Madelung's claim is that al-Qāsim was

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[127] See: Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations*, 439-491

[128] Guillaume, A. 'A debate between Christian and Moslem doctors', *Centenary supplement of the journal of the Asiatic society*, (Oct. 1924), 233-244. The authenticity of this source is questioned by some scholars.

[129] Al-Qāsim ibn Ibrahīm (785-860), grew up in Medina and lived part of his adult life in Egypt. Among other works he wrote an epistle on the existence of God and His creation and, like many Muslim theologians of the period, also wrote a refutation of the Christians. He was a fierce

influenced by Abū Qurra and not the other way around. Nevertheless, certainly during Theodore's time, even though not at the heart of Islamic Empire, Mu'tazili thought would still have been the dominant strand of thought. The contents of his own works, of course, also tell us something about the Muslim context, as will be seen below.

As a result of the particular context in which Abū Qurra lived, there are a number of themes which can be detected across his works. These are: what the human mind can know about God (primarily that He exists and has a Son who is his equal); the relationship between faith and reason; the determination of the "true" religion; free will; the death and Incarnation of Christ; the veneration of icons; and whether Christ willed to be crucified. His treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity lies within in a wider treatment of the nature of God and a particular emphasis on the divine nature of the Son, with the first three of the themes mentioned above preceding the subject by way of grounding his arguments concerning the nature of God.

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deanthropomorphist, and agreed with the Mu'tazila on the topic of the existence and unity of God, although not a Mu'tazilī thinker himself. See: Abrahamov, B. *Al-Ḳāsim b. Ibrāhīm*.

2.1.4. Works relating to the Trinity

Of a considerable volume of Abū Qurra's extant works, only one treatise can be said to have the Trinity as its main subject, which will therefore form the basis of the close textual discussion which follows. However there are small sections of other works which relate to the doctrine of God, and in particular to the nature of the eternal Son as the Word of God, and the divine attributes of God. These will also be examined where appropriate.

The treatise which deals specifically with the doctrine of the Trinity is a work which is given the rather lengthy title: *Mīmar yuḥaqqiqu annahu lā yulzamu l-Naṣārā an yaqūlū thalātha āliha idh yaqūlūna l-Āb ilāh wa-l-Ibn ilāh wa-Rūḥ al-Qudus (ilāh) wa-anna l-Āb wa-l-Ibn wa-Rūḥ al-Qudus ilāh wa-law kāna kull wāḥid minhum tāmm ʿalā ḥidatihi* [130], 'Treatise confirming that Christians do not necessarily speak of three gods when they say that the Father is God and the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, and that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, even though each of

[130] ibid., 453

them is fully God by himself'. It is a self-contained work dealing with the question of the Trinitarian nature of God and, as such, will be the main source to be examined in this study. For the purposes of convenience, this treatise will hereafter be referred to as the *Mīmar*. The work is currently available in six manuscripts, two of which date from the twelfth century and the remainder from somewhere between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.[131]

A section in a work entitled the *Mīmar fī wujūd al-khāliq wa-l-dīn al-qawīm* , 'Treatise on the Existence of the Creator and the True Religion'[132], concerning the divine attributes of God and God as Trinity will also be examined here. The treatise can be found in two manuscripts from between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries.[133] In one manuscript, the full title of the work is given as: 'On the truth of the existence of God and that he is a Trinity of hypostases and on the truth of the Christian religion and that there is absolutely no religion in the world other than it'[134], which further

[131] ibid., 453-454
[132] ibid., 448
[133] ibid., 449
[134] ibid., 448

indicates its relevance to the doctrine of the Trinity and will be referred to as '*wujūd al-khāliq*'. In this work, Theodore Abū Qurra imagines himself coming down from a deserted mountain to find people of various religions claiming to have the truth. His imaginary task is to assess which religion is the most worthy or true based on rational methods alone. He does this by ascertaining what can be known about God from what we know about man, and looking at agreements and disagreements between religions on the subjects of the 'permitted and the forbidden' and 'reward and punishment'. His conclusion, unsurprisingly, is that based on rational evidence only Christianity can claim to be the true religion.[135]

The third work which proves relevant to the question of the explanation of the Trinity is entitled: *Maymar ʿalā sabīl maʿrifat Allāh wa-taḥqīq al-Ibn al-azalī*, 'Treatise on the way of knowing God and the confirmation of the eternal Son'.[136] The work can be found in a total of five manuscripts, the earliest dated to the twelfth century and the

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[135] Griffith, S.H. 'Faith and reason in Christian *kalām*. Theodore Abū Qurrah on discerning the true religion', in Samir, S. K. and Nielsen, J.S. (eds) *Christian Arabic apologetics during the Abbasid period (750-1258)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994)

[136] Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations,* 457

latest to the eighteenth.[137] Prior to the section about the eternal Son, Abū Qurra outlines three ways in which humans are able to achieve some understanding of God. The first he calls ‘knowledge through effect’, in which he puts forward a causality argument which leads back to an ultimate maker. This proves that God exists. The second method is knowledge through likeness, whereby Abū Qurra explains how God’s creation must resemble Him in some way, something which he also addresses in his *Mīmar*, and, as such, which will be examined more fully later on. Abū Qurra’s final method is knowledge of what is dissimilar, which has to do with God’s attributes meaning an entirely different thing to their human counterparts. He then sets out to explore how these methods of knowledge can guide the scholar to the knowledge that God has a Son, again something which will be touched upon in due course.

A number of Abū Qurra’s other surviving works, both in Arabic and Greek, which while not necessarily meriting a detailed investigation, are nevertheless linked to the

[137] ibid., 457-458

explanation of the nature of God. A number of these works involve the status of the Son as the 'Word' of God and as co-eternal with the Father, and the refutation of those who claim that the Son and Spirit are created.

2.2. Setting the context

2.2.1 Relationship between faith and reason

As mentioned previously, the relationship between faith and reason and the question of what the human mind can know of God are two themes which Abū Qurra addresses in a number of his works. He almost invariably uses analogy and metaphor to explain himself. In the treatise concerning the Trinity, which forms the main text of this study, Abū Qurra gives analogies of people who are too proud to accept something which they do not understand, and yet trust a doctor to diagnose them and treat them without knowing whether the medication he prescribes will kill them; or people who trust the captain of a ship to transport them safely without knowing for certain whether he is capable of sailing a ship. Equally, he criticises

those who have blind faith in God without seeking to determine through the use of their intellect whether a certain person is sent to them by God. He says:

> In faith concerning what has come from God, are three [types]. Among them there are those who obstruct faith completely, because they feel that their mind is following a message that their knowledge does not comprehend. And among them are those who have made their mind accept that a message comes to them from God, which their knowledge does not comprehend, but they neglect their faith and do not allow their intellect to verify it. And among them are those who use their intellects to verify a message that is attributed (*yusnad*) and truly related (*yastanid*) to God but [at the same time] do not ignore their faith.'[138]

Although there is no explicit mention of any particular religion at this point, it soon becomes clear that Abū Qurra considers the Muslims to be those who have blind faith without verifying whether a message or prophet is sent from God or not, and furthermore who accept as a prophet a person who suits them based on their greed and desire and who will offer them the easiest path, rather than one who merits

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[138] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 22. 6-11

acceptance through the performance of miracles. As will be seen shortly, the topic of motives for the acceptance of a particular religion forms the mainstay of his argument concerning the “true” religion.

What Abū Qurra advises is that a person should humble him or herself to have faith in something which they cannot fully grasp, but then guide their faith using their reason. The person who does this, Abū Qurra explains:

> ‘… resembles a fair judge who does not execute a judgement with clear testimonies until he has unequivocally examined what is to be examined and settled whether their testimonies are worthy of acceptance regardless of whether their testimony agrees with his views or not.’[139]

Unsurprisingly, the only people who can be seen to balance faith and reason in the correct manner, according to Abū Qurra, are those who profess Christianity. The idea of using one’s God-given reason in order to aid the understanding of revelation is one which also sums up the Mu‘tazilī theological approach. Whether such Muslim thinkers

[139] ibid., 26.1-4

were influenced by Christians like Abū Qurra, or vice versa, remains an unresolved question.[140] Broadly speaking, it is likely to have been a case of mutual influences and borrowings as opposed to a unilateral transfer of ideas. The transmission of Greek philosophical and logical thought into Arabic via Christian translators may well have created a renewed interest in rational thought in both Christian and Muslim circles. Whatever the case, it can be seen that Abū Qurra, whether intentionally or unintentionally, begins from a shared standpoint; the existence of a God who can be best 'known' through a combination of reason and revelation.

2.2.2. Christianity as the true religion

Having determined the correct balance between faith and reason, Abū Qurra briefly explains that based on the reasons which have incited people to adopt a given religion, only Christianity can be said to be the true religion. Other religions, he claims, were all accepted through deception or desire; or for political or tribal

[140] For a brief summary of the debate surrounding theological influences in this period Cf. Chapter 1, 66, n. 86

reasons. The only reason that Christianity was accepted was due to miracles sent by God, performed by individuals who consequently deserved to be followed and believed. This, again, is a theme which appears repeatedly in Abū Qurra's works; in fact he himself refers to having written a whole treatise on the subject, which may be a reference to his *wujūd al-khāliq*[141] or to another work which is no longer extant. In the *wujūd al-khāliq* , Abū Qurra outlines his scheme for discerning the correct religion which assesses each religion based on revelation and reason concerning three categories: what human nature tells us in terms of us being created in the likeness of God; commanding the good and forbidding the bad; and reward and punishment. For Abū Qurra then, reason leads one to the only true religion, which is Christianity, and therefore it should be accepted.

It is also interesting to note that these categories once again correspond to Mu'tazilite concerns; indeed the latter two of the three categories correspond directly to two of

[141] Dick, Ignace (ed.) Thawdūrus Abū Qurra, *Maymar fī wujūd al-khāliq wa-al-dīn al-qawīm*, (Jūniyah : al-Maktabah al-Būlūsīyah, 1982) and Lamoreaux, J. *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, (Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 2005), 1-25 (for English translation)

the five central tenets which came to characterise the Mu‘tazila[142]. As pointed out above, the general inquiry into what human reason can discern about God also formed a fundamental backdrop to Mu‘tazilī thinking. However, where Abū Qurra and his Christian contemporaries differed significantly is in their basic assumption that whilst God is ultimately transcendent, something can be known of Him, as humans bear a resemblance to the divine being, albeit a far inferior one. This difference will be explored further in Part Two of this study as it is one which all three of these Christian authors share, and one which significantly affects the arguments they employ in giving proofs for the doctrine of the Trinity.[143]

The two themes of the relationship between faith and reason and the way to discern the true religion form a prelude for Abū Qurra’s explanation of the Trinity. He clearly advocates the use of reason in order to determine which religion can claim to be the true religion and sets out to show that only the Christian gospels can make this claim. As such, Abū Qurra firmly believes that the gospels should be accepted without

[142] Al-wa‘d wa al-wa‘īd الوعد و الوعيد and al-amr b-il-ma‘rūf wa-l-nahī 'an al-munkar الأمر بالمعروف و النهي عن المنكر

[143] Cf. Chapter 5.1.

further question, and, as they describe God's nature as Trinitarian, this should be accepted without the need for further rational proofs. This is something which he repeatedly emphasises during his explanation of the Trinity in the *Mīmar*.

2.3. Explanation of the Trinity

Having laid the groundwork for the rest of his *Mīmar*, Abū Qurra explains the purpose of his work:

> '…to convince those who have confused minds in regard to the teaching of the Christians that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three hypostases (*aqānīm*) [and] one God when they [the Christians] claim that each one of these hypostases is a perfect divinity according to itself, because those who are confused say that this teaching cannot be so; rather it must be the case that either one of the hypostases can be called divine in order that there is [only] one God, or that each one of the hypostases is divine and therefore it is said that they are three gods.'[144]

[144] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 27.11-16

In setting himself this task, Abū Qurra is addressing the main problem his Muslim counterparts have with the doctrine. In their minds, it is logically impossible for God, who is strictly one and simple, to be considered as three distinct divine aspects without attributing division and composition to His nature or implying a plurality of divinities and therefore falling into the error of polytheism (*shirk*). Theodore is aware of Islamic objections to the doctrine with which he intends to engage and refute in the rest of the work, through the use of scriptural and rational proofs. He does not feel the need to explain the term *uqnūm*, meaning hypostasis, which suggests that both his Christian and Muslim readers would have been familiar with its usage.[145]

Fortunately for modern scholars of Abū Qurra, one of the Melkite theologian's extant writings is his Christian 'Confession of Faith', which sets out his fundamental beliefs in opposition to the various 'heresies' as deemed by several Church councils, and which therefore lays out his Trinitarian expression in a non-polemical context, or at least a context where his opponents are not directly Muslims. It is therefore worth summarising Abū Qurra's statements on the Trinity, in order to gain an insight into

[145] The issue of terminology used to convey the term hypostasis will be addressed in Chapter 5.3.

how he understood and expressed the Trinity in Arabic, before looking at his explanations and justifications in more Muslim-orientated texts.

> 'I believe in the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit: three hypostases (*aqānīm*), one nature (*ṭabīa'*). Not one hypostasis as Sabellius said, and not three natures as Arius said…I do not say that the son is of the substance (*jawhar*) of the Father but the Holy Spirit is not from the substance of these two as Macedonius said. Rather I say that the three of them are one substance…Each one of them has an essential property (*khāṣṣa dhātiya*) which does not cease and does not transfer [to another member of the Trinity]. For the Father it is being unbegotten; for the Son it is being begotten; and for the Holy Spirit it is procession…The three of them are eternal, not one of them precedes the others…I recognise each one of them as a perfect divinity in his distinctiveness. The three of them are one God, not three gods as the wretched Philoponus claims. For their substance is one, and the Son and Spirit are related to the Father without composition or intermingling in its hypostasis.'[146]

This passage is particularly useful as it gives us Theodore's preferred and accepted Arabic terminology for the expression of the Trinity, and therefore provides a useful platform from which to investigate the terminology used in his more apologetic works,

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[146] Dick, Ignace, ed. And trans. 'Deux écrits inédits de Théodore Abuqurra', Le Muséon 72, (1959), pp.56-57

and indeed the works of his Christian contemporaries, which will be examined more closely in Chapter 5.3.

2.3.1. Scriptural Proofs

Abū Qurra offers two broad types of evidence in order to support the notion that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is the most fitting way to express the nature of the Godhead. The first are scriptural proofs. Having already asserted that Christianity is the only religion which can claim to be the true religion, Abū Qurra proceeds to give some examples from the Bible. He clearly feels that these proofs should be accepted if one recognises the validity of his former arguments, which show that both faith and reason commend Christianity as the best religion.

> 'We have already affirmed for you in this treatise in part and in other [treatises] in summary [147] that it is indeed compulsory for everyone to believe in the Gospel and the

[147] Lamoreaux explains that he reads *bi-talḥīṣ* in order to understand the phrase as '…in this treatise in brief, elsewhere in detail', as opposed to *bi-talkhīṣ*, meaning in summary and therefore being synonymous with al-ījāz. This author has not been able to find the term '*talḥīs*' meaning 'in detail': the

Law of Moses and what is between them from the books of the prophets. And these books which we mentioned we find them mentioning that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God.' [148]

Within his section concerning biblical evidence, Abū Qurra first puts forward three quotations from Psalms to show that when God refers to himself in the third person, for example, 'The Lord said to my Lord…'[149], he is actually referring to Himself and Christ, thus pointing out that He has an eternal Son. Next he quotes the likes of Moses, Noah, Hosea and David to point to out that although God often refers to Himself, he is still one God. According to Genesis 9:6 God said to Noah: 'In the image of God I created Adam' and also in Gen 1:27 it is said: 'God created man, in the image of God He created him'. These two quotations are provided to show that although in each instance God is both the one who speaks and the one who is

closest term with such a meaning would be '*tamḥīs*', which seems less likely than *bi-talkhīṣ*, in terms of a scribal error.

[148] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara,* 27.17-20

[149] Ps.110:1

referred to, He is not counted as two gods. Theodore adds a number of similar quotations to the same effect.

Abū Qurra then uses quotes from John 1:1 ‘In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God…’ and Job 33:4, ‘The Spirit of God created me’, to clarify that once again God is counting His Word and Spirit as being God and with God but that this does not imply multiple gods. Finally Abū Qurra gives the baptismal formula as found in Matthew 28:19, thus leading the reader to the Trinitarian nature of God, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as revealed by the Old and New Testaments. Once again he emphasises the fact that the scriptures alone are enough evidence to prove a Trinitarian Godhead.

> ‘As for the Christian community, we praise Christ who alerted our minds to have good faith and guided us to believe in the Holy Books. It would have been sufficient for us to believe that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God and each one of them is God, as was testified for us by the Holy Books, even if we did not see in these matters anything that verifies for us what we have believed according to the realm of

> intellect. How would the testimony of the scriptures not be sufficient for us? The implementation of the intellect has no purpose except to convince others.'[150]

Once again, Abū Qurra has stressed the fact that biblical evidence alone should be enough prove the Trinitarian nature of God, on the basis that Christianity has already been proven to be the true religion and so the truth of its scriptures has also been proven.

2.3.2. Rational Analogies

Having given a number of biblical passages which point to the Trinitarian nature of God, Abū Qurra then turns to rational proofs, presumably in order to strengthen his argument for those who do not accept Christian scriptures. He begins with an argument, based on Aristotle's unity of species[151], in which he explains the unity of

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[150] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 47.12-16. The word 'nā' (us) the end of this passage is read in a generic sense meaning 'others' in order to convey the sense of the paragraph.
[151] Aristotle identified five types of unity whereby something could be indivisible (and therefore one) in one respect, and at the same time divisible (and therefore many) in another respect. His categories

the Godhead as one 'nature' (*ṭabīʿa*) and three 'persons' (*wujūh*), giving illustrative examples based on the temporal world. An example of nature, he tells the reader, would be that of 'man', where 'Peter' would be an example of a person. The fundamental difference between the two categories is that number may be predicated of person but not of nature. In the example given, therefore, one could refer to Peter, James and John as three persons with a single nature, 'man', but one could not logically refer to 'three mans'. In the same way, Abū Qurra continues, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit may be referred to as 'three persons' with a single nature which is 'God', but not as 'three Gods'.

> 'Likewise know that the Father is a God but God is not the Father. And the Son is God but God, in person, since the term God indicates the nature,[152] is not the Son. And the Holy Spirit is God but God is not the Spirit, so if you were to count the Father, Son and Holy Spirit then you ought not to attach number to the name of God so that

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included; one by accident, one by continuity, unity of substratum, unity of genus and unity of species. For Aristotle, it seems, the latter three categories were to some degree interchangeable and it is the 'unity of species' which most Christian philosophers seemed to accept as most suitable. The 'unity of species' allowed that two individuals of the same species could be described as one in the sense that they are both 'humans' for example. The example Aristotle gave is that of Socrates and Plato being described as one category, that of 'rational animal'.

[152] Lamoreaux removes the phrase '*fī wajh idh ism al-ilāh dalīl ʿalā al-ṭabīʿa'* as it appears to be added in by a later hand as further clarification.

you would say three Gods. Otherwise you have attached number to what cannot be numbered. You ought [instead] to count three persons as one God, because 'person' is a logical name (*ism mantiqī*) and it is not constant (*bi-thābit*), nor does it belong to [only] one of them. The name 'person' belongs to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit and every one of the angels and humans and animals and other connected beings (*ghayr al-munfaṣilāt*). The logical name was brought in so that one can apply number to it because it is incorrect for number to be applied to their common name that is associated with their constant nature, so that it does not follow from this that there are different natures, as we have said previously.'[153]

With this explanation, Abū Qurra is taking the conception of the unity of species and attempting to further explain how something can be said both to be 'one' and 'three'. He distinguishes here between 'common name' and 'logical name'. The former he explains, refers to the nature of something, for example, 'man' as illustrated above, to which number cannot be predicated, whilst the latter refers to the 'person' such as 'Peter' or 'John', to which number may be predicated. In terms of the Godhead then,

[153] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 34.16- 35.5

God as ‘nature’ can only be conceived of as one, whereas his hypostases, which fall into the category of ‘logical names’, may be considered three.

The analogy of three individual men sharing a common nature, he acknowledges, is not a perfect one. Human beings are separated in space and into distinctive forms and have differing wills and states, whereas the Father, Son and Holy Spirit do not differ in any of these respects. A more fitting analogy, Abū Qurra feels, is that of three lamps in a house, which fill a house with light so that the three rays of light emitted from them are indistinguishable.[154] He then gives two similar examples of three voices reciting a single poem and three pieces of gold being referred to as a singular noun ‘gold’ as opposed to ‘golds’. Being careful to emphasise the incomparability of Father, Son and Holy Spirit with such created entities and temporal analogies, Abū Qurra nevertheless clearly feels that such analogies are useful in order to help human minds understand the Trinitarian nature of God.

[154] This analogy is one also favoured by Abū Rā’iṭa.

‘And this should be a sufficient indication that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit ought not to be spoken of as three gods, even though each one of them is a perfect divinity. Indeed Christianity is crowned [the victor] in its teaching that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God even though each one of them is a perfect divinity; and this is testified by the revealed books and by proper intellect through the employment of analogy in the correct manner to things according to how they resemble Him in the state in which it resembles Him.’’[155]

The use of analogy in describing the nature of God is an interesting phenomenon in Christian Arabic texts of this period. In some ways, it is very unremarkable, as Christians are told in the very first book of the Bible that ‘God created man in His own image’ (Gen. 1:27), thus allowing some link between God and his creation. As such, Trinitarian analogies are a very traditional Christian tool, found in the earliest Christian works concerning the Trinity. They were frequently employed by the Cappadocian Fathers, who had much to do with developing and refining the doctrine into its widely accepted form. They were also a source of influence for John of

[155] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 37 6-11

Damascus, and therefore almost certainly for Abū Qurra too. Indeed, Abū Qurra not only uses Trinitarian analogies, as will be discussed below, but appears to employ analogy and metaphor frequently and almost instinctively, an example being the opening to his *Mīmar* concerning types of faith.[156] In the Islamic context, and particularly in the Mu'tazilī school of thought, the use of temporal analogy would have been completely rejected due to the strong desire to protect the transcendence of God. That said, reasoning by analogy (*qiyās*), was a process used by Muslim legal scholars in order to make judgements about new situations based on the teachings of the Qur'an and the Hadith. It is possible therefore, that Abū Qurra felt the use of such reasoning would be the most effective way of showing that there is no necessary contradiction in the doctrine, rather than to actually attempt to prove the truth of it. The use of analogy to explain the doctrine of the Trinity in an Islamic context will be considered in Chapter Five of this study, as they relate to all of the Christian authors examined.[157]

[156] Cf. 93-94.

[157] For a fuller discussion of the use of analogy and metaphor by all three Christian authors studied here, see chapter 5.1.

2.3.3. Attributes of God

In his treatise entitled *wujūd al-khāliq*, Theodore Abū Qurra includes a section on how one can infer the attributes of God from the virtues of Adam. Beginning with a metaphor of a man and his reflection in a mirror, Theodore points out that a man only sees his face through its likeness in the mirror and can know what it looks like, even though the likeness is only a representation. The face of the man, meanwhile, is superior to the reflection and unlike it in that it actually exists.

Using this analogy as a way of introducing the idea of resemblance between man and God, Abū Qurra begins by explaining that Adam's attributes, and therefore presumably all human attributes, come in pairs.

> 'To the nature of Adam belong virtues and imperfections. In the case of Adam in his nature, today he exists and tomorrow he does not exist, and he is also living and dead, knowing and ignorant, wise and unwise, powerful and weak. And all of his

> attributes (*ṣifātihi*) are like this in pairs, those which are virtues and those which are imperfections.'[158]

God, however, Abū Qurra is quick to point out, has no imperfections. It is only in terms of virtue that Adam resembles Him. From this basis, Abū Qurra lists a number of virtues which we can see in Adam and from which we can infer something about the nature of God, although he always repeats that God 'is raised up away from it [a given attribute] in dissimilarity' (*yartafa' 'anihi/ha bi-l-khillāf*). The attributes he refers to are: existence, life, knowledge, wisdom, seeing, hearing, power, goodness, favour, righteousness, patience, mercy, tolerance, forgiving, and justness. For each one, Abū Qurra's argument takes the same format. Taking knowledge as an example, he says:

> 'And likewise we see that Adam is knowing so we say: that Adam was knowing, so whomever he comes from is without a doubt knowing. And from Adam being knowing, we perceive that God is Knowing. But the Knowledge of God is not like the knowledge of Adam, rather it is raised above it and is dissimilar, because the

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[158] Dick, *Maymar fī wujūd al-khāliq*, 220, section 9

> knowledge of Adam is from his senses or from someone who taught him. And he did not know what went before him nor whatever was in front of him, and not much of what was in his hands.'[159]

The list of attributes given clearly reflects Islamic thought in that the list almost mirrors those given by a number of Muslim sects and schools. In particular, knowledge, power, life, hearing, seeing and wisdom were the most common attributes referred to by Muslim scholars of the period.[160]

The first three attributes Abū Qurra discusses, and indeed only attributes which he discusses in full, are existence, life and knowledge. For those familiar with the explanations of the Trinity put forward by his Christian contemporaries, two of whom will be explored in Chapters Three and Four, this apparent singling out of three attributes might lead the reader to think that Abū Qurra has deliberately highlighted

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[159] ibid., 222 section 17 and 18

[160] According to al-Ashʿarī, this is largely true of the Rafidites, the Zaydis, and most of the Muʿtazila; to name but a few sects, although they are all seen to differ over the meaning of these attributes and how they relate to God. Al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt*.

them, as a prelude to likening them to the hypostases of God. Indeed, as will be seen, his contemporaries refer to such attributes in order to draw a parallel with the Trinity. However, any suspicion that this is Abū Qurra's intention is halted in the next section where he goes on to discuss three other 'more noble virtues':

> Likewise Adam has other more noble virtues which are in God… I mean begetting and procession[161] and headship.

In a similar line of argument, Abū Qurra infers that because Adam begot something resembling himself and that something proceeded from him, over both of which he is head; then the one who created him must also possess these attributes. Again, Abū Qurra is careful to point out the differences. For Adam, the begetting of a son took place through intercourse with a woman, the procession of Eve from his bone resulted in a decrease in him, and he preceded both Eve and his son in time. None of

[161] The word '*inbithāq*' appears in Dick's Arabic but not Lamoreaux's English translation. However, Lamoreaux does use 'proceeding' in the next sentence and so it was either not present in the manuscript he consulted or has been accidentally omitted, or has been added by Dick. Later, in section 30 of Dick's edition, Abū Qurra uses the phrase 'begetting and headship' twice without 'procession'- though this makes sense as most of time he refers to the Father and the Son, often the inclusion of the Holy Spirit is implied. Cf. Dick, *Maymar fī wujūd al-khāliq*, 224 section 24 and Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 12

these things apply to the Godhead: the Son was begotten without need of a partner; no decrease occurred to God in either the begetting of the Son or the procession of the Holy Spirit; and has no temporal precedence over the Son or Spirit.

Begetting and headship are regarded by Abū Qurra as the 'best of virtues' (*afḍal al-fawāḍil*), without them, he claims, Adam would not have had the pleasure of life or headship. He would be reduced to the same level as beasts and his attribute of speech would therefore be unnecessary. Indeed, Abū Qurra argues, none of his virtues would be classed as virtues if he did not have someone who resembled him. Therefore, the virtue of begetting, on which all other virtues rely,[162] must be a virtue which God Himself possesses. If not, Abū Qurra tells us, Adam would be better than God in that he would have two virtues that God did not: begetting and headship, which is clearly absurd. Continuing to add weight to his argument, Abū Qurra reasons that if Adam were the head of one like himself, then God could not merely be the head of His creation, but must be head of one resembling Him, namely Christ.

[162] 'Ammār makes a similar argument concerning attributes relying on or deriving from the two attributes of Life and Speech.

Adam would not have been content with being the head of creation without one like himself, for that would make him head of beasts and insects. Moreover, the distance and difference between God and humans, who share nothing in common, is so much more than between humans and animals, who share the nature of being living, so God cannot simply be head of creation alone.

He concludes:

> 'Therefore, from what intellect [can] deduce from the resemblance of Adam's nature, God is three persons: Begetter, Begotten and one who Proceeds.'[163]

This argument, using the virtues of Adam to determine the attributes of God, is one which appears to be unique to Theodore Abū Qurra. Once again, Abū Qurra leads the reader to the concept of a Trinitarian God by beginning with a discussion of His divine attributes, and it is perhaps significant that he never uses the term hypostases, even after moving away from the concepts of divine attributes and introducing the distinctly Christian notions of begetting, headship and procession. He then continues to explain the relative unity of the persons of the Trinity in a traditional Christian

[163] Dick, Ignace (ed.) *Maymar fī wujūd al-khāliq*, 228, section 41

manner, that is to say that the three persons are distinguished only by the nature of relationship to one another as the one who begets, the one who is begotten and the one who proceeds.

This argument can also be found, in part, in his treatise *On the way of knowing God*. Here he argues again that God must be able to beget one like Himself, otherwise He has a major imperfection. Abū Qurra also expands on the difference between man and God in terms of temporal precedence. A human father precedes his son in time only because of an imperfection in humans, that is to say humans are begotten in an incomplete state; they are not able immediately to beget another until they have matured. God however, does not have this inability or imperfection and so begot His Son from eternity, and therefore does not come before Him in time.

This work, the *wujūd al-khāliq*, is one of Abū Qurra's few almost completely rational treatises in which he seeks to give reasoned proofs as to the Trinitarian nature of God. In terms of leading the reader to this nature of God, he employs a clever and

inventive scheme which uses logical proofs to show what can be inferred about the nature of God, which is that he has a number of virtues or attributes, of which the three most important are begetting, headship, and procession, which highlights the Trinitarian nature of God in accordance with Christian scriptures. Yet, in terms of Christian-Muslim exchange and the potential Muslim element of his readership,[164] it is worth noting that all of his arguments are based on the acceptance of man's resemblance to God, which, as has been mentioned, is something which would have been unacceptable to the majority of Muslims.

Moreover, the three attributes which Abū Qurra identifies as being the best of virtues are very much Christian attributes which relate specifically to the doctrine of the Trinity and so draws away from Islamic thought at this point. This, as will be seen in due course, is unlike his the approach of his contemporaries, who go further in terms of likening divine attributes which feature in Islamic thought to the three persons or hypostases of the Trinity.

[164] The question of audience is addressed in more detail in Chapter Six.

2.4. Response to Muslim Questions

Aside from his discussion of the attributes of God in his *wujūd al-khāliq*, Abū Qurra also engages with his Muslim counterparts by answering hypothetical questions put to him by those to whom he refers as having 'no intellect.'[165] In the *Mīmar*, after giving proofs from both scripture and reason, Abū Qurra turns to deal with the question of whether one being or three beings created the world. The question evidently stems from the fundamental inability to understand how something can be said to be simultaneously one and three, which we know was an issue for the Muslim thinkers who engaged with Christian thought. Abū Qurra explains:

> 'If you say three created the world, they find this repulsive. If you say that one created the world, they consider that the other two hypostases (*uqnūmayn*) to be invalidated.'[166]

Once again, the lack of translation or explanation of the term *uqnūm* would suggest that Abū Qurra's audience were familiar with the Syriac concept which is used by all

[165] This could equally refer to Jews as well as Muslims, since both have issues with the doctrine of the Trinity.

[166] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 37.13-14

three of the Christian authors who appear in this study and which will be explored further in Chapter Five. The term also appears in a number of the extant Muslim sources we have from a later period.[167] Moreover, the fact that Abū Qurra, who came from a Greek liturgical and theological background, uses a Syriac term as opposed to a Greek or Arabic one, supports the notion that the term *uqnūm* was common currency as regards discussions concerning the Trinity.

In the above quotation Abū Qurra is showing awareness of the Muslim disdain for the doctrine of the Trinity and their inability to understand how God can be spoken of as one when He also has distinct hypostases. In order to address this misunderstanding, Theodore once again launches into a series of temporal analogies to clarify how the Christian expression of only one God creating is not contradictory to saying that the Father, Son or Holy Spirit created. Taking the example of the prophet Moses, Abū Qurra points out that it is possible to say "The prophet Moses

[167] The term 'uqnūm' is acknowledged in most extant Muslim sources dealing with the Trinity in the ninth century, such as Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity" (Thomas *Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*), al-Nāshi' al-Akbar's "Refutation of the Christians" (Thomas, *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology*) and Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī's refutation of the Christians, as preserved by the Jacobite Yaḥyā ibn ʿAdī. (Périer, A. 'Un traité de Yaḥyā ben ʿAdī')

spoke the truth" and possible to say "The tongue of the prophet Moses spoke the truth". However, one cannot logically say "The prophet Moses **and** his tongue spoke the truth", as Moses spoke through his tongue, i.e. not separately from it.[168] He uses further examples including the sun and its rays; a person and their eye; and fire and its heat. Fire can be said to burn a person, and the heat of a fire can be said to burn a person, but one cannot say "The fire and its heat burnt me" because fire burns a person **through** its heat.

> 'You say that the heat of the fire burnt me and you say that the fire burnt me but you do not say that the fire and its heat burnt me because the fire does not burn except with its heat.'[169]

In a similar way, one can say that "The Father created the world" and that "the Son created the world", but not "The Father **and** the Son created the world", because the Father creates **through** the Son.[170] The rest of his argument concerning this question, posed by real or hypothetical opponents, is rather long-winded, as will be seen, but is

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[168] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 37

[169] Ibid., 38.19-20

[170] Ibid., 38

designed to prove the above statements about the Father and Son (and later on the Holy Spirit); that individually either one can be said to act, but not together. Here, Abū Qurra uses terms common the discourse of Arabic grammar, one of the oldest Islamic sciences, explaining the inability to logically say, for instance, that both the heat **and** the fire burnt me' in terms of the construct phrase in Arabic (*al-iḍāfa*). His argument is that if one refers to 'the heat of the fire', it makes no sense to say that both the noun which is annexed in the phrase (i.e. 'heat'), and the noun to which 'heat' is annexed (i.e. 'fire') do something together, even though each individual element can be said to do it separately ('the heat burnt me', 'the fire burnt me') or as a construct phrase ('the heat of the fire burnt me'). In the same way, both the Father and Son cannot be said to create together as Father and Son, which implies multiple gods, but one can say that 'the Father creates' or that 'the Son creates' or that 'the Father creates through the Son' which by implication might literally be expressed as a construct phrase "the Son of the Father". The use of Arabic grammatical categories may well have been a bid on Abū Qurra's part to express the relationship of the hypostases in logical terms which a Muslim opponent may more readily understand.

Having used the heat analogy to introduce the relationship of the hypostases, Abū Qurra explains further:

> 'We are not of the opinion that the heat is more related to the fire than the Son is related to the Father nor that the heat is more connected to the fire than the Son is to the Father and as each one of them [Father and Son] is a hypostasis, because the divine nature does not accept composition as bodies do. Nor is there matter and form in them [the hypostases] and one does not find difference (*ghayriyya*) in a certain hypostasis from among them. But the position of the Son [in relation to] the Father is the same as the position of the heat of the fire [in relation to] the fire and the ray to the sun and the word to the mind, though the Son is a complete hypostasis, because the divine nature is too refined to have difference in terms of its hypostases.'[171]

The relationship of the Son to the Father, therefore, is like that of heat to fire, but not identical as the Son, unlike the heat is a full hypostasis (and so fully God), as the divine nature is not subject to composition or change. This statement, that God is not a body and therefore not subject to division, composition or change, is one which is

[171] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 39.2-9

confirmed in both the Christian and Muslim tradition, and which was emphasised particularly by the Mu‘tazila in their desire to protect the transcendence and simplicity of the divine Being.

In order to solidify his argument concerning the relationship of the hypostases to one another and the Godhead, Abū Qurra cites biblical passages taken from the words of St. Paul and St. John which refer to the Son using various metaphors such as the ‘Light’, ‘Wisdom’ and ‘Power’ and ‘Word’ of God, something which John of Damascus also does in his *Exposition*.[172] and offers an explanation for why these names were used:

> ‘And John the evangelist has called him “Word” when he said that in the beginning there was the Word, and the Word was with God. Why did the two theologians refer to him with these names? It was not because he [Christ] is not a hypostasis and a perfect divinity. Rather it was to teach the people that, in the same way as it is not said that the annexed noun and the noun to which annexation is made [i.e. the two nouns in a construct phrase such as ‘heat’ and ‘fire’] are [both] said to have done

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[172] John of Damascus, Exposition, 14-15

> something, even though each one can be said to do it by itself, so too are the Father and Son not said to create [together], even if each can be said to create by Himself.'[173]

Such metaphors, Abū Qurra claims, were used simply to help people understand this fundamental concept of two related entities and what can be said about their actions. Abū Qurra is quick to add, however, that theologians such as John and Paul were concerned that conceiving of the godhead in such a manner would imply that the Son were not a complete hypostasis or not fully God in the same way as the Father. For this reason, they also referred to the Son, in places, as God.[174] In doing this, Abū Qurra implies, those such as Paul and John were referring to the divine nature of the Son which is common to all the hypostases. Therefore if one refers to the divine

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[173] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 39.15-18. The term 'annexed noun' (*al-muḍāfa*) is a grammatical term referring to what is also known in terms of Arabic grammar as the construct phrase (*iḍāfa*), which refers to possessive phrases such as 'the heat of the fire' or 'the light of the sun'. Abū Qurra appears to be likening the relationship of the Son to the Father (or put differently 'the Son of the Father') to the relationship between the two nouns in a construct phrase. This may reflect an awareness on the part of Abū Qurra, whether conscious or subconscious, of the importance of grammatical science in Arabic, especially in the realm of Qur'anic exegesis. This, however, given the brevity of the reference, can be little more than speculation.

[174] Cf. John 1:1 and Rom. 9:5

nature, it not only preserves the simple and non-composite nature of God, but also removes the need to say ‘the Father and Son created.’ The Holy Spirit, Abū Qurra explains, is similar to the Son in that he is annexed to the Father in a similar way and yet also a full hypostasis.

In summary, Theodore lays out the teachings of the Church with respect to the nature of the Godhead. The point of his fairly convoluted argument, it would seem, is to show that each of the hypostases is fully God, even though the Son and Holy Spirit are annexed hypostatically to the Father and that, at the same time, the three hypostases are all one God. Christians use analogies to help people understand, but in reality, analogies are not a perfect representation of the relationship between the hypostases, which are unlike anything temporal. One of Theodore’s main concerns, it seems, is to show that where apparent contradictions appear in the Bible, they can be explained rationally, without affecting the Christian conception of God.

The second question from those with ‘no intellect’ is of a similar nature and once again guided by the inability to understand how Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be one God. A question is put to the Christians, asking whether they deny every God other than the Father; or every God other than the Son; or every God other than the Holy Spirit. The suggestion is that if a Christian were to answer that he denies every God other than the Father, then the Son and Holy Spirit must not be God, or, if he were to reply that he does not deny every God other than the Father, then he must affirm multiple Gods.[175]

Abu Qurra dismisses the question as crass. The analogy he uses to demonstrate this crassness is that of a person having a gospel placed in front of them and being asked if they believe in that gospel. When they say yes, they are then asked whether they deny all other gospels, to which they also reply yes, even though there many copies in the world. The implication is that it is permissible to deny every other gospel, as one is not referring to the individual copy of the gospel which sits before

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[175] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 42

them, but to the substantial nature (*jawhariyya*) of the ‘gospel’, which is one and the same for all copies. In a similar vein, if one were to talk about denying Gods other than Christ, they would not be referring to His hypostasis, but to His nature (*ṭabī‘a*), which is ‘God’.[176] Theodore once again supplements his explanation with more illustrative analogies, this time of a person’s image in three different mirrors, or as drawn on three pieces of paper.

Having answered the two questions put to him, Abū Qurra turns the tables, so to speak, and addresses a question to those who ‘deny the Son and Spirit out of fear of believing in three Gods’[177] and asks them directly ‘Does God have a Word?’ [178] Abū Qurra concludes immediately that if his interlocutor says no, then he would be making God mute and a lesser being than humans, therefore they must say yes. He

[176] ibid. It is interesting that Theodore uses *jawhariyya* to speak of the temporal substance of the gospel but uses *tabi‘a* for the substance (ousia) of God. The use of terminology relating to God is explored in Chapter 5.2.

[177] Once again this would appear to be a reference to the Muslims but in theory could also be aimed at the Jews.

[178] ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī asks a similar question of his Mu‘tazilī reader in his *k. al burhān*. Cf. Chapter 4.2.1.

then moves onto a follow up question: is the Word of God a part of God?[179] If his opponent replies that God's Word is a part of God then he allows composition in God's nature, which he knows the Muslims will not allow. Therefore his opponent is forced to make God's Word a full hypostasis, with the same being said about His Spirit. This is a very concise argument. Both Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī ask similar questions of their Muslim counterparts, but go into much more detail, as will be seen in the following chapters. Abū Qurra either shows little awareness or acknowledgement of the intricacies of Mu'tazilī teachings concerning the 'word' or 'speech' of God, or assumes that his reader will follow the argument without detailed explanation. He makes no attempt to justify why, in the Muslim intellectual context, Word and Spirit should be accepted as hypostases and not other of God's divine attributes.[180] It may be that he has engaged in this argument in more detail elsewhere, although he does not say this and does not appear to do so in any other of his extant works. Another possibility is that he has borrowed the argument in an

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[179] This is a question which Abū Rā'iṭa asks in his *al-Risāla al-ūlā* but as part of a much longer, more detailed argument than Abū Qurra. Cf. Chapter 3, 175

[180] John of Damascus alludes to the argument that God must have a Word and Spirit in chapter 100 of De Haeresibus, as so does Timothy I in his debate with al-Maḥdī. For them it is obvious that He must have.

abbreviated form, though this is probably unlikely due to the concise nature of it, and the fact that similar but not identical arguments appear in the works of Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, which makes it likely that it is a common one.

Abū Qurra then re-iterates that God and his Word and Spirit are one and likens it to a human being and word his and spirit being one person, although he is careful to point out that God is far above human beings in His transcendence.[181] The final issue Theodore deals with is biblical passages which refer metaphorically to the Son and Holy Spirit as body parts of God, the Son being referred to as ' the right hand of God' and the 'Holy arm of God', for example, and the Spirit as the 'finger of God'. Abū Qurra explains that there are lots of other names like this in scriptures which help people to understand that the God and His Son and Spirit are one God, much like a person and his arm and finger is one person, although the two are not fully

[181] This analogy is attacked by al-Baqīllānī and 'Abd al-Jabbār among others. See: Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*.

comparable as ‘the divine nature is exalted above division, composition and other such things’.[182]

In his conclusion of his *Mīmar*, Abū Qurra tells his reader, be he one ‘who believes in the Torah’, one ‘who believes in both the Torah and the gospel as well the books that stand between these’ or one ‘who does not believe in the Old and New Testaments which are in the hands of the Christians, those who reject and disregard faith’ that they should accept the Trinitarian nature of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Theodore directs the latter group, presumably his Muslim audience, to the beginning of the treatise, whereby his rational proofs for the acceptance of Christianity as the true religion should lead his readers to accept Christianity and therefore Christian doctrine, which is attested to in the scriptures.

[182] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 45.16-17

2.5. Discussion: Theodore Abū Qurra's understanding of the nature of God

From his works relating to the doctrine of the Trinity it is clear that Theodore Abū Qurra understood the nature of God in a traditional Christian sense. For him, God is one nature and three hypostases named Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who share a relative unity based on their relationship to one another as 'begetter', 'begotten' and the one who 'proceeds', which is a prominent feature of Cappadocian thinking. Both his Trinity specific treatise, the *Mīmar*, and the short section relating to the Trinity in the *wujūd al-khāliq*, confirm Abū Qurra's position. The former aims to show that the concept of the Trinity is not inherently contradictory and that three hypostases can be one God without implying multiplicity in the Godhead, whilst the latter is concerned with showing rationally that God's most noble attributes are begetting and headship, leading to the acceptance of the doctrine of Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit as described above. In addition, Abū Qurra's confession of faith in Arabic gives a clear insight into the terminological expression of his Christian beliefs in a non-polemical context.

Theodore Abū Qurra's whole approach to the explanation of the Trinity is rooted in the truth of Christian scriptures, along with the teachings of the Fathers and edicts of the Church councils. To his mind, since the truth of Christian scriptures has been verified, biblical proofs which point to the divine being as Father, Son and Holy Spirit should be enough to persuade anyone of God's Trinitarian nature. As a prelude to his explanation of the doctrine, therefore, Abū Qurra discusses the relationship between faith and reason, and briefly sets out his rational criteria through which one can determine which religion can claim to be the true religion. This is a theme which appears repeatedly in Theodore's works, and is set out in much more detail in his *wujūd al-khāliq*.

Abū Qurra appears to believe, or at least implies that he believes, that if one uses his own intellect, and Abū Qurra's criteria, in order to ascertain 'the true religion' then one must conclude that Christianity is the true religion and therefore unreservedly accept its scriptures. This is something which he emphasises repeatedly in his

Mīmar, before agreeing to give rational proofs alongside biblical ones, for those who refuse to accept Christian scriptures.

The biblical passages which Theodore chooses to quote towards the beginning of his treatise are all designed to show how God is one, despite Him referring to Himself when He speaks, or being referred to by different names. He then turns to rational proofs in order to explain the Trinitarian aspect of the nature of God. Abū Qurra begins this section with a discussion of names referring to individuals and names referring to natures, an argument which is based on the Aristotelian concept of the unity of species. In this way, Abū Qurra shows how three individuals can share a common nature, which, by analogy, can be likened to the nature of God. He uses a number of Trinitarian analogies, most of which can be traced back to the early Church Fathers, and which will be examined more closely in chapter five. In defining his categories of 'nature' and 'person', Abū Qurra uses terms relating to Arabic grammar in order to further clarify the relationship of the three hypostases and demonstrate that they are not three separate divinities.

The other major facet of Abū Qurra's rational approach to the nature of God concerns the divine attributes of God, which tell us about His nature. In dealing with this topic, it appears that Abū Qurra is aware of Muslim teaching concerning the divine attributes, as he gives a list of attributes which sound very much like those given by Muslim sects of the period.[183] However, the basis of his whole discussion of the attributes is that there is a resemblance between man and God, as God's attributes are to be inferred from the virtues of man. The logic behind this is that man could not possess a quality which the one who created him does not possess. Moreover, Abū Qurra maintains that the best of these virtues seen in Adam are those of begetting and headship, and that the fact that Adam begot a son like himself, and that Eve proceeded from his bone points to the Trinitarian nature of God as one who begets, one who is begotten and one who proceeds. Although Abū Qurra is careful to stress the perfection and ultimate transcendence of God regularly throughout his works, he seems to be very much at ease with the use of temporal analogy and the concept of resemblance between God and man, despite the deep dislike of it within the

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[183] The "Attribute-apology" of each author forms the subject of Chapter 5.5.

dominant strand of Muslim thought during this period. This issue will be discussed further in part two of this thesis.

Whether or not Muslims formed the main component of Abū Qurra's audience, it is clear that his explanation of the Trinitarian nature of God would have been written in response to direct or indirect Muslim pressures and questions concerning the doctrine. Indeed, Theodore's engagement with Islamic thought can be detected throughout his works, not only in the questions he responds to, but in terms of the language he uses and strands of thought to which he alludes. One of the most overt instances in which Abū Qurra can be seen to engage with Muslim thinking, is when he refers to those 'who deny the Son and the Spirit for fear of believing in three gods', whom he then challenges by asking them whether they say that God has a Word.

Abū Qurra then goes on to force his opponents to admit the Word and Spirit as complete hypostases, through a brief series of questions in a style similar to that of *kalām* dialectical reasoning.

However, there is also an argument to be made for how little Abū Qurra engages with Islamic thought in terms of his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. He does not explain any of his Trinitarian terms such as ‘nature’, ‘person’ or ‘hypostasis’; he relies heavily on biblical proofs which would most likely be dismissed by his Muslim counterpart with the accusation of *tahrīf*; and he bases many of his explanations and arguments on a premise that would be fundamentally unacceptable to most Muslims: the resemblance of God to His creation, which is promoted through his almost unceasing use of metaphor and analogy to aid his explanation of the doctrine. Although he makes mention of God’s attributes and gives a Muslim-sounding list, Theodore never really engages with the concept of particular divine attributes referred to by Muslims and their potential comparability with the hypostases as the other two Christian authors of this study will be seen to do. His questioning of those who are afraid of falling into the error of believing in three Gods, while it touches on the divine attributes debate and stylistically echoes *kalām* methodology, is incredibly brief and concise and does not engage with the Muslim (particularly Mu‘tazilī) thought in anywhere near the detail that his two contemporaries, Abū Rā’iṭa and ‘Ammār al-

Baṣrī, do. This question of how far each author engages with Muslim thinking will be addressed in more detail in Chapter Six of this study.

Abū Qurra, therefore, uses a combination of biblical and rational proofs, in an attempt to demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity. His aim, it would seem, is not to prove the truth of the doctrine, which is already proven by Christian scripture, but to express it clearly in Arabic for what appears to be both a Christian and Muslim audience.[184] His works relating to the Trinity, of course, naturally have an apologetic tone, and do respond to some of the questions his Muslim opponents are asking, using Muslim concepts and language where he feels they aid his explanation. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Melkite theologian's central concern is his scheme for discerning the true religion, which can be ascertained from both the number of his works which deal with this topic and his repeated argument in his *Mīmar*, that the doctrine of the Trinity should be accepted on the basis that he has logically shown Christianity to be the true religion,. As a result it would seem, Abū Qurra's

[184] The question of audience will be examined further in Chapter Six.

explanation of the Trinity itself is a fairly traditional one, relying heavily on biblical proofs and Trinitarian analogies, with a relatively limited engagement with Muslim thinking in comparison to his two contemporaries who will be examined shortly.

CHAPTER 3: ABŪ RĀ'ITA AL-TAKRĪTĪ (C.755-c. 835)

3.1. Background

3.1.1. Biography

'Habīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī the Jacobite', as he refers to himself in the title of his *Refutation of the Melkites,*[185] is a man about whom little is known. From his name we can infer that he came from the Christian town of Takrīt, situated around 140 kilometres northwest of Baghdad on the Tigris River. Abū Rā'iṭa's dates can be established primarily through two recorded events which make reference to him. The first is found in the prefatory comments of his *Refutation* mentioned above, in which we are told that he was called to the court of the Armenian Prince Ashūt Msaker around 815[186] to argue against the Melkite, Theodore Abū Qurra, on behalf of the Jacobite (Syrian Orthodox) Church. Abū Rā'iṭa responded by sending Nonnus, deacon of Nisibis and his relative, in his place. The second reference is found in a text by Michael the Syrian who refers to both Abū Rā'iṭa and Nonnus

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185 Abū Rā'iṭa, *Die Schriften des Jacobiten*.

186 Haddad, Rachid. *La Trinité divine chez les theologiens arabes: 750-1050* (Beauchesne: Beauchesne, 1985), 55

of Nisibis in connection with a synod held in 828.[187] These two dates therefore put his period of activity in the early ninth century, along with Abū Qurra and ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī. There is no mention of his activities after 828.

Abū Rā’iṭa’s role within the Jacobite church remains a matter of dispute. Having been referred to as both Bishop of Takrīt[188] and Bishop of Nisibis in different places, it is actually now thought that he was probably neither.[189] What can be ascertained, however, is that Abū Rā’iṭa was a respected theologian, a ‘teacher’ or ‘apologist’ (*malpōnō* in Syriac, *vardapet* in the Armenian texts which refer to him), who was invited on at least two occasions to represent the Jacobite church and defend its beliefs in official settings.

3.1.2. Historical context

During Abū Rā’iṭa’s life, the city of Takrit and the surrounding area had very much become Syrian Orthodox region, the ‘“Jacobite” centre in Mesopotamia’[190]. The Jacobite Church, so

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[187] Ibid., 56

[188] Rachid Haddad feels that Abū Rā’iṭa was probably the Bishop of Takrīt but explains his doubts. Haddad, *La Trinité divine,* 55

[189] Sandra Keating addresses the question of his role and position in some detail. Keating, S. *Defending the “People of Truth”,* 41-48

[190] Griffith, ‘“Melkites”, “Jacobites” and the christological controversies’, 49

called after the sixth century Bishop of Edessa Jacob Baradeus (d.578) who is noted for his reorganisation of the Syrian Orhodox Monophysite community, appears to have flourished there during the early ninth century, though Christians are said to have been in the area from the first Christian century.[191] Cyriaque, the Patriarch of Antioch (793-817) is reported to have gone to Takrit during his office to establish a strong metropolitan in the region,[192] which lay to the South East of Antioch and the important theological schools of Nisibis and Edessa.

Following the cession of a number of provinces to the Sassanid Empire by the Roman Emperor Flavius Iovianus (Jovian) in 363,[193] the Syriac-speaking Christian communities had found themselves cut off from the Byzantine Empire. Although they remained Christian and continued to be theologically influenced by the Greek Fathers, the church developed its own distinctive cultural identity through the use of the Syriac language as the language of liturgy. Just over a century later, the Councils of Ephesus (431) and Chalcedon (451) would lead to

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[191] Rassam, S. *Christianity in Iraq* (Herts, UK: Gracewing, 2005), 67

[192] Fiey, J.M. *Chrétiens syriaques sous les Abbassides: surtout à Baghdad (749-1258)*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Vol. 420, (Louvain: Secretariat du CorpusSCO, 1980), 64

[193] Peters, F.E. *Aristotle and the Arabs: The Aristotelian tradition* (London: University of London Press Ltd, 1968), 36

the theological divorce of the Syriac Christian communities from the Melkite Church, which advocated the official Byzantine doctrine.

Shortly after Abū Rā'iṭa's birth, the nearby city of Baghdad became established as the new capital of the Islamic Empire under the 'Abbasid ruler al-Mansūr. As a result of this move, the Syriac Christian communities of the region suddenly found themselves living side by side with their Muslim rulers, at the heart of the Islamic Empire.

Abū Rā'iṭa, therefore, would have found himself in close contact with Islamic thought and may well have been involved in *munazarāt*, debates held at the court of the caliph where Christians were often invited to defend and discuss their beliefs with a Muslim scholar in the presence of the Caliph.[194] Certainly from his written works it is clear that he had substantial knowledge of Islam as will be seen in due course.

The establishment of the Islamic seat of power in Baghdad would also have continued to promote the development of Arabic as the *lingua franca* of the region, though it is almost

[194] See: Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth"*.

certain that Abū Rā'iṭa originally came from a Syriac-speaking background. This is evident not only from his familial connection to Nonnus of Nisibis, who wrote most his works in Syriac[195], but also from the style of his works and the language and grammar used, which Joshua Blau refers to as 'Middle Arabic'[196], Arabic which had some deviations from the classical which were typical of Aramaic style and grammar. Abū Rā'iṭa, then, would have been fluent in both Syriac and Arabic, enabling him to stand on the threshold between the Syriac Christian community and their Muslim neighbours.

3.1.3. Intellectual Context

Like his contemporaries, Abū Rā'iṭa flourished during an intellectually fascinating period, which saw many strands of thought overlapping, diverging, colliding, reshaping and developing as a result of communities with different cultures and beliefs finding themselves in

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[195] Griffith cites evidence that Nonnus also wrote in Arabic, although none of his Arabic works are extant. Griffith, S.H. *The beginnings of Christian theology in Arabic: Muslim-Christian encounters in the early Islamic period*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), chap. IV, 116

[196] Blau, J. 'The state of research in the field of the linguistic study of middle Arabic, *Arabica*, vol. 28, no. 2-3, numéro special double: etudes de linguistique Arabe (Jun-Sep 1981), 187-203

contact under Islamic rule. Part of a long Christian Syriac tradition, Abū Rā'iṭa came from a tradition which boasted the likes of Philoxenus of Mabbug and Jacob Baradeus.

The Jacobites, who had been persecuted under Byzantine rulers for their Christological beliefs, appear to have experienced a change of fortune under Muslim rule, which effectively elevated their status alongside their Melkite contemporaries as 'People of the Book' (*ahl al-kitāb*).[197] Indeed, a number of his works are concerned with inter-denominational matters,[198] two of which were written against the Melkites and one of those which names Theodore Abū Qurra specifically .[199] As a monophysite thinker, Abū Rā'iṭa criticised the Melkites for essentially making the same error as the Nestorians in allowing Christ to have two natures.[200]

Meanwhile, being in close proximity to the development of Islamic thought, Abū Rā'iṭa clearly felt the need to respond to questions posed by Muslims concerning the Christian faith, which

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[197] Lamoreaux, J. C. 'Early eastern Christian responses to Islam' in J. Tolan (ed.) *Medieval Christian perceptions of Islam: A book of essays*, Garland Medieval Case Books, Vol. 10, (New York: Garland Press, 1996), 4

[198] Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations*, 568

[199] Graf, G.(ed) *Die Schriften des Jacobiten Ḥabīb ibn Khidma Abū Rā'iṭa*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium Vol. 130 (Louvain: Imprimerie Orientaliste L. Durbeq, 1951)

[200] Griffith, '"Melkites", "Jacobites" and the christological controversies', 51

he did in several works.[201] This threefold intertwining of traditional Christian beliefs with Islamic theological concerns and the transmission of Greek philosophy into Arabic is very much reflected in Abū Rā'iṭa's works. He is clearly aware that evidence from scripture is not sufficient for his Muslim adversaries, as he responds directly to the accusation of *tahrīf*, but also feels the need to find other ways to answer challenges of Islam.

In terms of both subject matter and method, one can see the response to Muslim questions using language and concepts borrowed from internal Islamic debate and Greek philosophical thought, particularly Aristotelian thought, alongside more traditional Christian proofs which can be found in Syriac and Greek literature.

The evidence relating to the *munazārāt*, whether applicable to Abū Rā'iṭa or not, points to a somewhat intellectually open atmosphere, shows the close contact of Christians and Muslims, and explains the need for such Christian works, which consciously or unconsciously respond to their Islamic surroundings and a Muslim agenda.

[201] Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations*, 571-581

3.1.4. Works relating to the Trinity

The various writings of Abū Rā'iṭa have been preserved by the Monophysite community, in particular by the Coptic Church. To date there have been found twelve manuscripts encompassing eleven works, to which a further two titles of now lost works may be added.[202] His writings can be broadly separated into two categories; those written in defence of Christianity and those written specifically in defence of the West Syrian Jacobite church. Two of his works specifically deal with the doctrine of the Trinity and will be discussed here. However, other of his works may also prove useful, especially when dealing with terminological considerations, and will be referred to as and when relevant.

The main work to be discussed is entitled *'al-risāla al-ūlā fī al-thālūth al-muqaddas'* (The First Letter on the Holy Trinity) [203] and, as is suggested by the title, is a work dedicated specifically to the doctrine of the Trinity, addressed to a fellow Christian who has asked about the teachings of 'the People of the South', the phrase Abū Rā'iṭa uses for the Muslims. The work appears in five manuscripts, three of which were available to Georg Graf in preparing his

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[202] Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations,* 567ff.

[203] ibid., 572-574

edition of Abū Rā'iṭa's works in 1951 and all of which were available at the time of Sandra Keating's edition in 2006. Although these are the two major modern editions of Abū Rā'iṭa's works, there exists one further modern Arabic edition, specifically presenting the *al-risāla al-ūlā*, which was edited by the Lebanese Jesuit scholar, Salim Dakkash in 2005.[204]

The second work which contains a defence of the doctrine of the Trinity is a more general apology for Christianity known as '*Risālat al-abī Rā'iṭa al-takrītī fī ithbāt dīn al-naṣrānī wa ithbāt al-thālūth al-muqaddas*' (A letter of Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī on the Proof of the Christian Religion and the Proof of the Holy Trinity).[205] This work is found in three extant manuscripts, all of which contain the same eight writings, including his *al-risāla al-ūlā*. All of the manuscripts appear to be copies made and preserved by the Coptic Church in Egypt. Sandra Keating places the date of composition of *Al-risāla al-ūlā* and the *Ithbāt* between 820 and 828 and 815 and 825 respectively. The *Ithbāt*, she argues, is less sophisticated in terms of detail and argument which would suggest its earlier composition. Whilst this conclusion is certainly plausible, the amount of detail and complexity of argument is likely to have as much to do

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[204] Dakkash, S. (ed.) *Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī wa risālatuhu 'fi al-thālūth al-muqaddas'* (2005); available from: www.muhammadanism.org; accessed on 15/12/09. It is this edition which will be referenced in terms of the *al-risāla al-ūlā,* although all available editions have been consulted throughout.

[205] Thomas and Roggema. *Christian Muslim relations*, 571-572

with the intended audience for each of the works as opposed to purely being a chronological matter, which Keating does acknowledge.[206]

Al-risāla al-ūlā would appear to be the first of a series of three letters written by Abū Rā'iṭa. Like the first, the *Second Letter on the Incarnation* (*Al-risāla al-thāniya li-abī Rā'iṭa al-takrītī fī al-tajassud*) is widely available, though the third letter is now lost, known only by references to it made in other writings, whereby Abū Rā'iṭa speaks of three letters dealing with the Trinity and Incarnation.[207] This has lead Sandra Keating to speculate that the third letter may have contained a defence of Christian practices, seeing an overarching structure to the three works. This would certainly make sense given the topics which most Christian authors writing at this time appeared to have addressed, an agenda clearly motivated by Muslim objections to particular doctrines and practices.

Al-risāla al-ūlā is set up as a series of questions posed by opponents with answers. It is addressed to a fellow Jacobite asking to defend himself against Muslim polemic. The

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[206] Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth"*, 81

[207] ibid., 147-8

opening to this work is a fairly short one which follows the form of a typical Syriac preface asking God for guidance in his task, followed by a specific introduction to the purpose of his work, which is to clarify the teachings of the Muslims for a fellow Christian and to provide the confession of his own Jacobite community.[208] After laying out the difficulties he faces in this task, Abū Rā'iṭa says he feels compelled to do as Jesus Christ has commanded[209] and will therefore 'make an effort to reveal and clarify what is claimed about the two parties [Christians and Muslims] from the matter of their religion…'[210]

Abū Rā'iṭa's start point is a Muslim statement of belief about God which suggests that although both Christians and Muslims agree that God is one, their two conceptions of 'oneness' differ vastly. This leads Abū Rā'iṭa onto a long discussion about the nature of God's oneness. By identifying and logically eliminating various types of 'oneness', Abū Rā'iṭa demonstrates that the best way to describe God is as one in *jawhar* ('*ousia'* or substance), encompassing three hypostases (*aqānīm*). In doing so, he makes indirect reference to the

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[208] Abū Rā'iṭa never mentions the Qur'an, Muslims or anything Islamic by name: preferring terms such as 'your book', 'the People of the South', and for his own Christian community the term 'People of the Truth'. The reason for this, most probably, was that Abū Rā'iṭa was exercising caution for fear of directly attacking or upsetting his Muslim rulers though there is no explicit evidence for this.
[209] Here he paraphrases Luke 12:4-5 and Matthew 5:42 and 10:19
[210] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī*, 63.17-18

Muslim divine attributes debate by asking questions concerning God's attributes, their meaning and ontological status. Abū Rā'iṭa also directly responds to common questions posed by Muslims,[211] such as why the three hypostases should not be called three Gods, and why there are only three and not more. Towards the end of his letter, Abū Rā'iṭa also deals with the Muslim accusation of falsification (*taḥrīf*) of their holy scriptures. Although largely centred on philosophical and rational proofs taken from Aristotle, Abū Rā'iṭa also incorporates a number of other methods and arguments such as analogy and various biblical proofs.

The *Ithbāt* is of a slightly different nature, though it contains much of the same information concerning the Trinity as his treatise dedicated specifically to the doctrine. As mentioned above, this work is much more general in terms of subject matter, which includes not only discussions of God's unity, but also the Incarnation, the cross, direction of prayer, the Eucharist, circumcision and food laws. As such, the letter functions as a general exposition of

[211] Such questions appear to be common as they are found in texts from other Christian apologists of the period, as well as later Muslim sources. The two questions mentioned here are found in both Abū Qurra and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī. Al-Bāqillānī poses the question about the number of hypostases (Thomas, *Christian Doctrines,* 152ff.)

Christian belief in a polemical context, in response to the main concerns or criticisms of Muslim contemporaries.

Although probably aimed at Christians, it is clear from the subject matter that Abū Rā’iṭa has Muslim concerns in mind when writing. Indeed, his first topic after the introduction deals with how to assess the best or truest religion, by naming six fallacious reasons to accept a religion followed by one good reason. It would appear that the six unacceptable reasons are some of those which many Christians associated with Islam. Unfortunately the end of the treatise is missing and so the author’s own conclusion is lost, however, the direction and overall structure of the work is clear up until this point.

The section on the Trinity comes directly after his opening discussion about reasons to adopt or convert to a certain religion, whereby Abū Rā’iṭa concludes that Christianity is the best religion. It is no surprise that the Trinity comes first in his list of specific teachings and practices to be dealt with, as we know that, as a Muslim, it was the most difficult doctrine to understand. For the Mu‘tazila in particular, who were very much engaged in polemics and to

whom the unity of God was strictly emphasised, this doctrine would have been highly unacceptable. As a result, this sort of ordering of topics can be found in contemporary writings such as those of ‘Ammār al- Baṣrī and Abū Qurra. In this section, Abū Rā’iṭa explains the doctrine of the Trinity initially through the use of analogy, which he is careful to qualify. He then makes brief reference to and link between God having life and word which correspond to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, before putting forward a small number biblical proofs to further bolster his argument, after which he turns to the issue of the Incarnation.

3.2. Setting the Context

3.2.1. Agreement that God is one

Abū Rā’iṭa begins the main body of his *Al-risāla al-ūlā* with a statement of belief which he attributes to the ‘People of the South’.

> ‘…God is one, [who] has never and will never cease to be living, knowing, seeing, hearing, without companion in his substantial nature (*jawhariyyatihi*) or his dominion. He is the first and the last, the creator of the seen and the unseen, free from want,

perfect [in] His essence, he cannot be described by those who [try to] describe him, elevated above imperfection and incapacity, not described by division (*tab'īḍ*) nor partition (*tajazz'u*)[212], reigning, powerful, acting according to what He wishes, not seen, not felt, not comprehended and not limited, encompassing everything in His knowledge.'[213]

From the outset, then, Abū Rā'iṭa outlines a common starting point, a list of Muslim sounding attributes with which Christians presumably agree. This list demonstrates knowledge of the Qur'an and some of the teachings of certain Muslim sects of his day. Many of the given attributes appear a number of times in texts such as al-Ash'arī's *maqalāt,* a compendium of the positions and doctrines of different sects within Islam, written at least fifty years after this letter. It is most likely to be aspects of Mu'tazilī teaching that Abū Rā'iṭa is quoting, although

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[212] Keating reads this word as *al-tajrā* which she translates as 'nor by [having] an envoy'. Dakkash reads it as *al-tajazz'u* (partition), which, given the context makes more sense. 'Ammār al-Baṣrī uses this pair of synonyms in both of his works. Also, the pair is given in Al-Ash'ari's report of the position of the Mu'tazila 155/7-8 (*wa laysa bidha ab'āḍ(in) wa ajzā'*), the type of statement which this list of Abū Rā'iṭa seems to have depended on. However, Dakkash does acknowledge, however, that in the P, S and G manuscripts it is given as *al-tajrā*.

213 Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa*, 64.6-16

the list al-Ash'arī gives is much more extensive than Abū Rā'iṭa's account. The attributes given by Abū Rā'iṭa, which also appear in al-Ash'arī's work are as follows:

> '…God is one, there is nothing like him and He is hearing, seeing…He is not limited within space…cannot be touched…cannot be described…and the senses don't reach Him…He did not and does not cease to be knowing, powerful, living, eyes do not see Him and sight does not reach Him…there is no partner in His kingdom and no minister in His dominion.'[214]

The statement 'He has no partner in His dominion' can also be located in the Qu'ran (17:111, 25:2). Other Qur'anic phrases from Abū Rā'iṭa's list include: 'the First and Last' (57:3) and 'Knower of the seen and unseen' (6:73, 23:92).

However, despite these obvious references to Muslim teaching and thought, it would appear that Abū Rā'iṭa has included some language which would be unlikely to be found in a Muslim statement concerning God and which seems to be deliberately placed in order to establish a

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[214] al-Ash,arī, Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī. *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, H. Ritter (ed.), *Die Dogmatischen Lehren der Anhänger des Islam,* 3rd edition (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH, 1930), 155-156

common start point, which will eventually allow for his explanation of the Trinity. In particular, the phrase 'without companion in his substantial nature' should raise suspicions. Although '*jawhariyya*' and its more commonly used form, *jawhar*, meaning substance or being (most often the translation of the Greek term *ousia*) was known to the Mu'tazila and used by them to denote worldly substances in terms of their Atomistic view of the world, it was not used to refer to the divine being. Indeed, earlier in the same statement reported by al-Ash'arī above, we are told that God is 'not a substance'[215]. Therefore it is unlikely that this term would be included in a statement of the Mu'tazila.

What Abū Rā'iṭa seems to have done is cleverly inserted the word '*jawhariyya*', into the list of Muslim statements which he gives at the beginning, so that the phrase reads 'He has no partner in His substantial nature or his dominion', which, without the phrase '*fī jawhariyyatihi*', can be found in statements made by the Mu'tazila, according to Al-Ash'ari[216]. That is not to rule out altogether the possibility that Abū Rā'iṭa found this phrase in another source, be it Muslim or Christian, but from the sources available to us it would seem that this term has been inserted to suit his purposes; allowing him to introduce God's 'oneness in substance' as a basis for explaining the doctrine of the Trinity.

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[215] Al-Ash'ari, *Maqālāt,* 155.4

[216] ibid., 156

Having made the effort to show that Christians agree that ‘God is one together with the rest of His attributes’[217], Abū Rā’iṭa comes to what he seems to see as the crux of their disagreement, which is in their varying interpretations of the concept of ’oneness’:

> ‘Nevertheless, even if we agree with you in your teaching that God is one, what a great distance lies between the two statements in terms of what you think and what we describe!’[218]

According to Abū Rā’iṭa, it is not that Muslims simply disagree with the Christian conception of God, rather they misunderstand what Christians mean by their doctrine. This, therefore, is the first issue which Abū Rā’iṭa feels needs to be addressed in order to set the context for his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

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[217] Dakkash, *Abū Rā’iṭa,* 65.16. It is unlikely that Muslims would actually describe God in this particular manner, although they certainly would have referred to the attributes of God (*ṣifāt allah*).
[218] ibid., 66.11-12

3.3. Explanation of the Trinity

3.3.1. Types of Oneness

Abū Rā'iṭa opens with a hypothetical question to his opponents as to whether they describe God's oneness as one in genus (*al-jins*), species (*al-nau'*) or number (*al-'adad*). The categories of oneness to which he refers are taken from Aristotelian thinking, and indeed he relies heavily on Aristotle throughout most of his 'rational' arguments, which will be seen in due course.[219] His main concerns here are: to point out that the Muslims understand one in a numerical sense; to argue that this is not a fitting way to talk about the divine being; and to demonstrate that the question of the Trinity is not a numerical issue.

Abū Rā'iṭa quickly dismisses 'one in genus', as it would mean that:

> 'He [God] becomes a general 'one' for all kinds of different species, [which] is not permissible as an attribute of God.'[220]

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[219] Around a century later, the Jacobite Christian Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (893-974) also refers to the categories of genus, species and individual in a debate with the Muslim philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī. Périer, A. 'Un traité de Yaḥyā ben 'Adī', 6

[220] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa,* 68.8-9

Abū Rā'iṭa appears to be confident that no further explanation is needed and therefore that no Muslim would allow God to be a genus encompassing different species.

Assuming that his Muslim counterparts would say that God is one in number, Abū Rā'iṭa dwells on this option for a little longer.

> 'With your description of Him by number, you describe him with divisions and imperfections. Do you not know that the individual 'one' in number is a part of the number? Since the perfection of the number is that which comprises all types of number. So the number 'one' is part of number and this is a contradiction of the words that He is "perfect" [and] "undivided".'[221]

For Abū Rā'iṭa, one in the numerical sense signifies a single unit, the first in a series of other numbers, which is how all things in the world are counted and described. Referring to God as one in the numerical sense contradicts the fundamental Muslim belief that nothing resembles God, Abū Rā'iṭa informs us, and so is not a fitting description for the divine being. He makes

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[221] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa,* 69.1-5

this point later on in the same treatise, accusing the Muslims of anthropomorphism (*tashbīh*) by comparing God to 'number' which is comparable to creatures.[222] This little comment again demonstrates Abū Rā'iṭa's knowledge of his Muslim opponents and skill as a polemicist, as he turns the accusation of anthropomorphism against those such as the Mu'tazila, who strived to protect God's transcendence through the profession of His strict unity and the deanthropomorphisation of Qur'anic terms.

Concerning the category of 'one in species', Abū Rā'iṭa explains that the Muslims mistakenly think of 'one in species' in terms of 'one in number', as species comprises individuals which, in Muslim minds, are understood in a numerical sense. It is at this point that Abū Rā'iṭa introduces the concept of 'one in substance' (*jawhar*), which is evidently what he understands by 'one in species'. Here, Abū Rā'iṭa can again be seen to be subtly introducing Christian terminology into his argument, as with the introduction of '*jawhariyya*' to his otherwise Muslim sounding statement at the beginning of *Al-risālat al-ulā*.

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[222] ibid., 88.10-13. The Muslim philosopher, Al-Kindī, said a similar thing in respect to God's oneness not being a numerical oneness. See: Atiyeh, *Al-Kindī*, 64

What Abū Rā'iṭa is doing then, is calling upon the Muslims to define what they mean when they say God is 'one' and forcing them to logically dismiss all options except 'one in species', in the sense of 'one in substance'. In this way he is able to set context for introducing the Trinitarian formula:

> 'We described Him as one perfect in substance not in number, because in number, that is to say hypostases, He is three; so indeed this description of Him is perfect in both aspects.'[223]

One in substance, he tells the reader, shows that God is exalted above all other things, and three in hypostases because the number three encompasses both categories of even and odd. 'One' is the lowest and simplest form of odd number and two is the lowest and simplest form of even number. Together therefore, they encompass both types of number and so the number three is more perfect and a more adequate way to describe God, who encompasses everything. This is an interesting little argument which appears at two different points in *Al-risālat al-ulā* but not in the *Ithbāt*. It has been suggested that this argument may have Patristic roots, as numerical proofs were common among the Church Fathers, or even that it

[223] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa,* 70.2-5

might be traced back as far as Aristotle and Plato.[224] However, it may well be Abū Rā'iṭa's own argument. In any case, it is an argument which his nephew Nonnus of Nisibis also uses[225], which may suggest either that uncle or nephew invented the argument, or that they were both taking it from another, presumably Jacobite, source.

What they are both attempting to demonstrate is that the Christian conception of the nature of God is more appropriate and actually better preserves the transcendence of God because it makes Him stand further apart from his creatures, unlike the Muslims and especially the Mu'tazila, who make Him one in number like His creatures.[226]

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[224] Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth"*, 177

[225] Griffith, S. 'The apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis', in Griffith (ed.) *The beginnings of Christian theology*, chap. IV, 124

[226] 'Ammār says this more directly where Abū Rā'iṭa only insinuates it. Cf. Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 51

3.3.2. Absolute vs. relative names

Returning to the statement of belief which he attributed to the 'People of the South' at the beginning of *Al-risālat al-ulā* , Abū Rā'iṭa questions them as to the meanings of descriptions of God such as 'living' and 'knowing', beginning with whether they are considered to be absolute names or relative names. Again Abū Rā'iṭa is laying the groundwork for explaining the Trinity in terms Muslims might understand, at this point by borrowing language and concepts from Arabic grammar and the divine attributes debate and merging it with Greek philosophical notions.[227] By stating that their definitions are ambiguous, Abū Rā'iṭa is able to question such definitions and pursue what he understands by them, as a way to further his argument.

Absolute names are given to objects which cannot be predicated of something else, such as "earth" or "fire", he says, whereas relative or predicative names are linked to something else such as "knower" and "knowledge" or "wise" and "wisdom", for example. Attributes such as

[227] Harold Suermann points out that the distinction between absolute and relative attributes can be found as early as Tertullian, as well as in the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers. Suermann, H. 'Der Begriff Ṣifah bei Abū Rāʾiṭa', in S.K. Samir and J.S. Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arabic apologetics during the Abbasid period (750-1258)*, (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 167

“living” and “wise” are therefore related to God. After laying out this distinction, Abū Rā’iṭa then asks whether the names or attributes belong to God’s substance eternally, or whether He was described by them later as a result of His actions. Again he distinguishes between the two types of attribute, the former being inherent in God and the latter created by His action. For the attributes of divine knowledge, life and wisdom, Abū Rā’iṭa dismisses the latter option, as he knows that if one were to say that God acquired attributes as he merited them, then there would be a time when God was neither living nor knowing, which neither Christians nor Muslims would accept.

Having established that such attributes are related to God’s essence, the author then asks **how** they are related. The possibilities include: either as entities other than Himself, ‘as one partner is related to another’; ‘from Him’, as an action he has made; or ‘from His substance’.[228] Dismissing the first two possibilities, knowing that his Muslim counterparts would also dismiss them, Abū Rā’iṭa concludes that these attributes are related in that they are from His substance, in which case there are two further possibilities. The first is that they ‘parts of something perfect’, which neither party can accept as this allows division in the

[228] Dakkash, *Abū Rā’iṭa*, 74.17-75.1

Godhead, leaving the only other option, that these attributes are 'something perfect from something perfect'.[229]

This detailed inquiry betrays an awareness of contemporary Muslim debate, as Abū Rā'iṭa puts his finger on a central issue within Muslim circles as to the meaning of the divine attributes and their relationship to God. For Muslim thinkers, the question was not merely ontological; it also relied heavily on the science of grammar, which had developed as one of the earliest sciences in Islamic thought. As discussed in chapter one of this study, those such as Abū al-Hudhayl and his followers wrestled intensely with the problem of how the attributes of God could have real meaning and yet not imply a plurality of divinities. Abū Rā'iṭa is clearly aware of the Muslim debate, and uses what he knows about Muslim teachings to lead his adversary logically towards a Christian conception of the unity of God.

The other very much related issue which Abū Rā'iṭa touches upon here, is that of the gradual categorisation of attributes in Muslim thinking, which came about as a result

[229] ibid., 75.3-4

of dealing with this attributes problem, as discussed in Chapter One. As Islamic thought developed, those who affirmed the reality of the divine attributes, *al-ṣifātiyya* or traditionalists (as they are sometimes referred to), such as the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal, came to distinguish between seven *essential* attributes (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*): knowledge, life, power, will, hearing, sight and speech; which were seen to exist eternally in God; and a number of attributes of *action* (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*) such as generosity and creation, which came into existence in time and space at the point of interaction with their 'worldly' object, as an action of God. The Mu'tazilites also began to categorise the attributes of God into attributes of 'being' or 'essence' (*ṣifāt al-dhāt* or *ṣifāt al-nafs*), and attributes of 'act' or 'action' (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*), however their understanding of the essential attributes was that although they could be accepted as eternal, they were not distinct from God in any way.

Here Abū Rā'iṭa essentially asks whether Muslims see God's attributes as being inherent attributes of essence or created attributes of action, language which would be familiar to his Muslim readership, who were beginning to categorise God's attributes in this way. He

dismisses the option of them being created attributes, as this suggests that there was a time when they did not exist, and therefore there would be a time when God had no knowledge or life, for example. As seen above, Abū Rai'ta then logically leads his reader through to the concept of attributes being 'something perfect from something perfect', using what he knows from Muslim teachings to dismiss various alternatives.

Satisfied that he has shown that the life, knowledge and wisdom of God to be 'something perfect from something perfect', Abū Rā'iṭa explores this concept further. The attributes must either be described as separated and dissimilar, or continuous and connected, or simultaneously connected and separated. The first option cannot be accepted, he explains, as it would limit God and nothing within his substance can be divided and separate, unless the attributes are outside of His being. The second description is also incorrect, as it goes against the idea of the attributes being something perfect from something perfect, a teaching which attributes to 'them' i.e. the Muslims. By the process of elimination, therefore, the only option left is the third one, which describes the attributes of life, knowledge and wisdom as simultaneously connected and separated, and which leads him directly to his elucidation of

the doctrine of the Trinity, without yet having mentioned the Trinity at all during the build-up of this argument.[230]

In order to introduce and explain the doctrine of the Trinity for the benefit of the 'People of the 'South', Abū Rā'iṭa clearly felt that a number of premises had to be laid down, and a number of qualifications made. This he did by beginning with his account of a Muslim statement of belief and the agreement that God was one, before showing how Christian and Muslim conceptions of oneness differ vastly through the use of rational argument based on Aristotle's thinking. Then, using questions and language which are key to intra-Muslim debates about the nature of God and His attributes, Abū Rā'iṭa leads his reader to the point where one must agree that the life, wisdom and knowledge of God are both 'something perfect from something perfect' (the latter being the substance of God) and that they must be

[230] The manner in which Abū Rā'iṭa sets up this question of the relation of the attributes is clever: he is clearly phrases his questions to lead to the Christian conception of the relationship of the substance to the hypostases and the hypostases to one another, but speaks at this point about 'attributes' (ṣifāt) still, almost certainly knowing that his Muslim opponents have discussed and disagree upon the relation of the attributes to God's essence, and as a result, to one another. As seen in chapter one of the present study, Abū al-Hudhayl held that the attributes of God were identical to His essence, which raised questions as to how to distinguish the attributes from the divine essence and from one another. Meanwhile, Ibn Kullāb would say that God's attributes are 'neither identical nor not identical', which is not dissimilar to what the Christians say about the hypostases and which perhaps unsurprisingly helped to fuel accusations of him being sympathetic to Christianity.

continuous and divided at the same time, as both other options would invalidate Muslim teaching.

It is at this juncture, having established the aforementioned, that Abū Rā'iṭa begins to elaborate upon the nature and unity of God in traditional Christian terms, based on the accepted formula of one *ousia* and three *hypostaseis.* This switch in terminology is also noted by Harold Suermann who writes:

> 'Bei der folgenden Erklärung des "zugleichs" wechselt Abū Rā'iṭah die Terminologie. Der Begriff Attribut is nicht mehr der zentrale Begriff, sondern die drei Begriffe der Trinitätstheologie…'[231]

Using language and concepts which would be familiar to a Muslim audience, therefore, Abū Rā'iṭa prepares his audience for the traditional Christian conception of the nature and unity of God, upon which he will begin to elaborate in the remainder of the treatise.

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[231] 'In the following explanation of the "simultaneously [connected and separate]", Abū Rā'iṭa switches the terminology. The concept 'attribute' is no longer the central concept, but instead the three concepts of Trinitarian theology.' Suermann, 'Der Begriff ṣifah bei Abū Rā'iṭah', 162

God must logically be continuous and divided at the same time. Abū Rā'iṭa admits that this sounds absurd but explains:

> 'For we only describe Him as having continuity in [terms of] substance and dissimilarity in [terms of] individuals (*ashkhāṣ*)[232], that is to say in [terms of] hypostases (*aqānīm*). Then if they deny this description because of its obscurity to them and they say that this description is something which contradicts itself because the one whose substance were different from his hypostases and hypostases different from his substance would never be described [like this]; it would be contradictory and inappropriate. It is to be said to them: Does our description of his substance differ from his hypostases as you have described?'[233]

Aware that his Muslim audience will find the idea of something being simultaneously connected and divided logically absurd,[234] Abū Rā'iṭa protests that of course this is not what

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[232] *shakhṣ* (pl. *ashkhāṣ*) meaning 'individual', appears to have been a common synonym used to refer to the hypostases in Arabic, and is certainly known to Muslims such as Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq, Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī and later al-Bāqillānī. Interestingly, however, 'Ammar outrightly rejected the term as being too corporeal to refer to God. The question of terminology is dealt with in chapter 5.3.

[233] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa*, 77.4-11

[234] For instance, Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq spends much of his detailed refutation of the doctrine of the Trinity pointing out this perceived absurdity. Thomas, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*.

the Christians mean, they do not describe God as continuous and divided at the same time. Rather, they speak of connection and continuity in terms of God's substance and dissimilarity and division in terms of his hypostases. Again preempting his Muslim adversaries, Abū Rā'iṭa refutes the claim that, in describing the divine being in this manner, Christians are saying that God's substance is other than His hypostases.[235] In order to clarify his meaning, Abū Rā'iṭa uses an analogy of three lights in a house:

> '…we only describe Him as agreeing (*muttafaq*) in substance, differentiated (*mufāriq*) in hypostases and his substance is his hypostases and his hypostases are his substance, like three lights in one house.'[236]

The light of the three lamps, he says, can be distinguished as three self-subsistent entities, but they are all united in one inseparable light which lights up the house. This analogy also features in his treatise, the *Ithbāt*. In both cases he is careful to acknowledge that the analogy is limited, and that God is above all analogies. Indeed, when hypothetically challenged about how three lights being emitted from three separate sources (three lamps)

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[235] In al-Warrāq, this accusation of maintaining that the substance is other than the hypostases is one primarily levelled at the Melkites. Thomas, *"Against the Trinity"*.
[236] ibid., 77.16-18

can resemble the being of God, Abū Rā'iṭa replies that the analogy is limited and only shows similarity in one way (that of one inseparable light created by three different lamps) but not in every way, as one would then have to question whether it were a sound analogy. In doing so he refers to the '*ahl al-rayy*' (People of Opinion), most likely meaning the Islamic legal scholars who used analogy in their interpretation of Islamic law,[237] saying that they themselves teach that analogy is limited.

Being aware that the light analogy is far from perfect, Abū Rā'iṭa explains that actually it would be more appropriate, if the light were to resemble God more closely, to say that one light was the cause[238] of the other two in 'a natural substantial relation'[239], the two being 'something perfect from something perfect'[240]. To further illustrate his point, Abū Rā'iṭa then launches into a series of other analogies designed to show how things can be described simultaneously as one and three.

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[237] Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth",* 187

[238] This model of the Trinity, emphasising the Father as the cause of the Son and Holy Spirit, is a common one in the Eastern churches of this period. As such, all three of the authors studied here make reference to it.

[239] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa*, 79.8

[240] Ibid. p.79.9

His next analogy is a more fitting one, he feels; that is the relationship of Eve and Abel to Adam, who together are one in terms of their human nature and three in terms of hypostases. This is because their relationship to one another mirrors that of the Godhead: Adam being the begetter, Abel the begotten and Eve the one proceeding from Adam, just as the unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is a relative and relational unity. This analogy can also be found in John of Damascus, who refers to Seth rather than Abel, but uses the analogy in the same way to describe the relationship between the three hypostases, and in Abū Qurra, as mentioned in the previous chapter.[241] Abū Rā'iṭa also includes this analogy demonstrating the relative unity of the Trinity in the *Ithbāt*, where he appears to give a more directly Christian account of the doctrine by not spending time discussing the attributes of life knowledge and wisdom beforehand.[242]

Abū Rā'iṭa's other analogies include: Moses and Aaron being united in humanity and yet two individuals; the soul, intellect and faculty of speech being both continuous and divided; the sun with its radiance and heat; and the five bodily senses. Once again he is careful to reiterate that God is above all analogies, but seems to feel that they are useful to his

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[241] John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 8

[242] Keating, *Defending the "People of truth*", 112

purpose. With each analogy Abū Rā'iṭa's aim is to show how something can have simultaneous continuity and division; as well as point out that none of the three preceded the other two; that is to say that the Father does not precede the Son or Holy Spirit although they are 'from' Him.

Abū Rā'iṭa's extensive use of analogy seems odd if one accepts that his audience is primarily a Mu'tazilī one, as the Mu'tazila's concern with the utter transcendence of God meant that the likening of temporal things to Him would have been completely unacceptable. There are a few possible explanations for this. One is that Abū Rā'iṭa's audience were not from this Muslim theological school or at least not exclusively- indeed it has been suggested by modern scholars of Abū Rā'iṭa that his works were primarily aimed at Christians seeking to defend their beliefs to a Muslim audience. Another possibility is that he expected his Muslim audience to accept the use of analogy, either as he was not aware of their distaste for it, or because he hoped they would accept it even though they did not like it. His reference to the *ahl al-ra'y* might suggest that he was in part appealing to them as they were known to use analogy as a methodology. They, however, unlike Abū Rā'iṭa, used analogy in terms of temporal matters, not as a way to describe God Himself. Furthermore, Abū Rā'iṭa's deep

awareness of Islamic thought in other areas would make the possibility of his being ignorant of Muslim, and particularly Mu‘tazilī feeling, on this issue highly unlikely.

From his explanation of the term and his repeated warnings as to the imperfect nature of analogy, it would seem that Abū Rā’iṭa was aware of Muslim dislike of it, but felt that it was a rational argument which would aid his clarification of the doctrine of the Trinity, even if he risked the Muslim rejection of the use of analogy in itself. Moreover, as a traditional Christian method of clarifying the difficult and abstract doctrine of the Trinity, it was perhaps a natural tool to employ, especially having a significant Christian element to his audience. In his *Ithbāt*, Abū Rā’iṭa explains his use of analogy,[243] which he considers a form of rational proof aside from divine revelation. Here, he is very careful to stress that analogy must be used carefully and accepted fully, even though analogies are far removed from what they describe (i.e. the Godhead). For Abū Rā’iṭa, analogy is a useful tool to explain the Christian conception of God with the most comprehensible approach (*aqrabiha ma’khadh*).[244]

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[243] Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth",* 104.4-13
[244] ibid., 104.7

In order to further clarify the relationship between the substance and hypostases, Abū Rā'iṭa explains that the hypostases differ in their 'properties' or 'characteristics' (*khawāṣṣ*[245]) but that this difference in properties does not cause their substance to be different. This explanation is coming towards a traditional Christian clarification of the doctrine of the Trinity and how God's substance relates to his hypostases as a relative unity. The difference between the hypostases, he tells us in *Al-risāla al-ūlā*, is a relative difference and each hypostasis is recognised by the property which represents this relative difference.

> 'Rather, each one of them is recognised by its property; the Father by His Fatherhood, the Son by His Sonship, and the Spirit by His procession from the Father.'[246]

Like Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa begins to phrase the Trinitarian nature of God in a traditional Christian manner, clarifying the distinction between the hypostases as begetter, begotten and one who proceeds. The names Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Abū Rā'iṭa explains, are indicated in the New Testament through the baptismal formula found in Matthew 28:19.

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[245] The term *khawāṣṣ* is also used by 'Ammār and Abū Qurra as well as other Christian authors (See: Haddad, R. *La Trinité divine,* 182-3), and will be discussed further in Chapter 5.3.

[246] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa*, 80.17-18

These names are not found earlier, he tells the reader, as they were hidden from people who would not understand their meaning.[247]

Having set the context, used logical premises to introduce the types of oneness and thus the doctrine of the Trinity as a valid expression of God's oneness, and supported his explanation with illustrative analogies; Abū Rā'iṭa, in roughly the final quarter of his *Al-risāla al-ūlā*, turns to biblical proofs to enhance his argument that the doctrine of the trinity is the best expression of God's nature.

The first biblical-based argument he employs, is that of God referring to Himself in the plural, which appears in both the Bible and the Qur'an.[248]

> 'The close friend of God, Moses, said about God when creating Adam [that He said]: "Let us create[249] man in Our image and Our likeness". He did not say 'I will make man in My image and My likeness.'[250]

[247] Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth",* 118.15-120.1

[248] The 'plural argument' is one found in many of the extant Christian Arabic works from this period and will be examined further in chapter 5.2 of this thesis as it is common to all three of the authors studied.

Abū Rā'iṭa gives a few such examples from the Bible and then turns to his hypothetical Muslim reader: 'You will remember that in your book similar things to what we have described from the sayings of Moses and Daniel are also written, instances regarding God: "We said"[251], "We created"[252], "We commanded"[253], "We inspired"[254], "We destroyed".[255] Preempting a Muslim response that in Arabic the use of the first person plural is acceptable as a 'royal we', Abū Rā'iṭa rejects this on the grounds that Hebrew, Greek and Syriac all precede Arabic and do not allow this type of language. If the Arabs then insist that one man can say "We", then Abū Rā'iṭa will allow that a man can do so as he is made up of composite parts, namely body and soul, whereas God, who according to both Christians and particularly the Mu'tazila is simple and one, cannot use the first person plural in this manner. In this way, Abū Rā'iṭa cleverly uses the Muslim emphasis on the strict oneness of God against them. In the *Ithbāt*, Abū Rā'iṭa gives a much briefer account of this argument, using one or two biblical examples to show how 'He pointed to both of His attributes: His threeness and His

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[249] In the *Ithbāt he* presents the reference as: Let us create (*li-nakhluq*) man (*insānan*) in our image and our likeness' Keating, Defending the "People of Truth", 116.12; in *al-Risāla al-ūlā* he replaces the verb *khalaqa* with *ṣana'*.

[250] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa*, 91.9-11

[251] See for example: The Qur'an 2: 32, 34, 35, 37, 7:10, 14:47

252 ibid., 7:180, 15:26, 85

253 ibid., 10:24, 11:40, 17:17

254 ibid., 4:61, 7:117

255 ibid., 6:6, 10:14. The anonymous Melkite author of *On the triune nature* also makes reference to the Qur'an as 'your book'. Gibson, *On the triune nature*, 77.19

oneness'.[256] Here he elaborates no further and makes no mention of the Qu'ran at all, which may be significant to the question of his audience, which will be discussed further in due course.

In a similar vein, Abū Rā'iṭa next relates a short story about Abraham, taken from Genesis 18:1-3, in which Abraham sees three men outside his tent whom he recognises as the Lord and so bows down in front of them, again pointing to the oneness and threeness of God.

The last of Abū Rā'iṭa's biblical arguments involves giving examples of God being referred to together with His Word and Spirit, in order to again show the oneness of the divine being in three hypostases. Here he references Psalm 33:6, 'By the Word of God were the heavens created and by His breath each of their hosts' and Isaiah 6:3, in which he speaks of the angels praising God by saying 'Holy Holy Holy' three times, among others.

[256] Keating*, Defending the "People of Truth"*, 118.1

Having laid out these biblical proofs, Abū Rā'iṭa, in *Al-risāla al-ūlā*, anticipates the accusation of *taḥrīf*, that is the Muslim accusation that the Christians have altered or corrupted the scriptures which were sent down to them from God. This he defends by pointing out that these scriptures, meaning the Old Testament scriptures, are also with their enemies, the Jews, and that they are the same text, which means they could not have been corrupted. If his Muslim interlocutor argues that it was the Jews who corrupted them and misled the Christians, Abū Rā'iṭa encourages his fellow Christians to respond that if this were the case, then there would be original, unaltered copies in the possession of the Jews, as they would not want to risk their own salvation by adhering to corrupted scripture.

Arguments such as this in response to the accusation of *taḥrīf* can be found in contemporary Christian writings,[257] which suggests that it was a common accusation employed by Muslims

[257] 'Ammār al-Baṣrī dedicates substantial sections of both of his extant works to the authenticity of Christian scripture; before him Theodore bar Konī also addressed the question of *taḥrīf* in the tenth chapter of his *Scholion*. Bar Konī, Theodore. *Théodore Bar Koni: Livres des scolies (recension de Séert) II. Mimrè VI-XI*, R. Hespel and R. Draguet (trans.), *CSCO*, vol. 432, no. 188.

polemicists.[258] Indeed, the Qur'an itself refers to the distortion of the Old Testament at the hands of the Jews.[259]

3.4. Responses to Muslim questions

The final section of Abū Rā'iṭa's *Al-risāla al-ūlā* is made up of four questions likely to be posed by a Muslim adversary, and his responses to them. The first is a question already mentioned earlier in the letter, asking why the three hypostases are not considered three Gods, even though they are each described as Lord and God.[260] Abū Rā'iṭa denies that this is the case, and tells his hypothetical questioner that the individual hypostases are never spoken of without being in relation to one another. Using the human analogy, he explains

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258 Although, interestingly, extant Muslim works which deal specifically with the Trinity make less mention of *taḥrīf* than one might expect, nor do they make much reference to Christian or Muslim scriptures, preferring to use logical and abstract arguments to show the absurdity of the Christian teaching.

259 Cf. 2:75, 4:46

260 This is a very typical question put to Christians by their Muslim counterparts. As such, all three of our Christian authors respond to it, and it can be found, in one form or another, in most of the extant Muslim works dealing with the Trinity from the ninth century and beyond.

that multiple human beings are multiple hypostases, not multiple substances, of the one general substance which is called ‘human being’.

This leads onto a question as to whether the name ‘God’ is considered to be the name of the substance in general.[261] Abū Rā’iṭa affirms this, but says that the name God, being the name of the substance, is also the name of his hypostases. Here he introduces a new analogy concerning gold. A piece of gold, like the general term gold, is still referred to as gold, and a number of pieces are still called ‘gold’ as opposed to ‘golds’.[262]

The third question revolves around the issue of whether or not the Father precedes the Son and Holy Spirit, as He is the cause of the other two. The Muslims argue that, as their cause, He must precede them. Abū Rā’iṭa, however, argues that this is not the case, and that one can find natural examples of a cause not preceding other elements, such as the sun, which

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[261] The designation of the hypostases as ‘particular’ or ‘specific’ and the substance as ‘general’ is something which ‘Ammār treats in some detail in his *Masā’il*. cf. Chapter 4, 234-39. The terminology may well be traced as far back as Aristotle (cf. chap 5 , 43-35) and is found in pre-Islamic Christian authors such as Philoxenus. cf. Chapter 1, 38 ff.

[262] Abū Qurra also uses this analogy, though does not specifically talk about the relationship between the substance and hypostases as that of the general to the particular. cf. Chapter 2, 109

he feels proves his point. The sun, he says, is the cause of its heat and light, and yet it is never without them. Similarly, the Father is the cause of the Son and Holy Spirit, yet has never been without them.

Continuing on from this matter of causality, the question is put to Abū Rā'iṭa as to whether something which is caused by something else can be classed as its part or its action. Either answer cannot be allowed in Muslim eyes, as a part or action could not be referred to as 'God'. Abū Rā'iṭa agrees with his interlocutor, in that if this were the case then it could not be allowed. However, the Muslims have once again misunderstood what the Christians mean. The term 'part', according to Abū Rā'iṭa, has two different meanings. The analogy he employs here is that of Moses and Aaron being parts of the category of 'human being' and yet still being perfect whole individuals, whereas body parts such as hands and feet are parts which individually cannot be referred to as 'human being'.

> 'Now it is said that 'he is from him' not [as] an action, nor as a part of him, rather something perfect from something perfect as we have described. And it is deserving of the name which it is from, that is to say human being from human being.'[263]

This, Abū Rā'iṭa concludes, is how the Son and Holy Spirit relate to the Father. They are a part of the number not of the essence (*dhāt*) of the Father: two perfect beings from two perfect beings.

3.5. Discussion: Abū Rā'iṭa's understanding of the nature of God

The *Ithbāt* and the *Al-risāla al-ūlā* vary not so much in content as detail. In the former work, the subject of the Trinity makes up just under a third of the treatise, as part of a number of Christian beliefs and practices which were objectionable to their Muslim neighbours. The latter is a letter dealing specifically with the Trinity, which spends much more time questioning and defining particular terms surrounding the nature of God. The works also

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[263] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa*, 101.9-11

differ in the way in which the author approaches the subject of the Trinity and therefore in how the material is ordered. This is most likely a result of the two works being aimed at slightly different audiences, which will be discussed further in the final chapter of this thesis.

The *Ithbāt* reads like a traditional Christian exposition which puts forward and explains Christian beliefs and practices in a general way. Naturally the work is shaped by its context and therefore guided by the concerns of their Muslim rulers in terms of the beliefs and practices which are defended. Abū Rā'iṭa shows awareness of his Muslim counterparts throughout: explaining the use of analogy as rational proofs for the Trinitarian nature of God; likening God's being living and speaking to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; and responding to things that 'they may say.'[264] However, his writing is seems to be primarily aimed at Christians looking to defend their beliefs, as there is little direct reference to a Muslim readership; only to questions that may be asked of a Christian and how he should respond.

Meanwhile, although Abū Rā'iṭa himself claims to be writing his *Al-risāla al-ūlā* for a fellow unnamed Christian, it is evident that this treatise is focused much more on a specific Muslim

[264] Keating*, Defending the "People of Truth"*, see for e.g. 106.13, 122.13, 124.7 etc.

audience and engages with Islamic thought to a far greater extent. To this end, Abū Rā'iṭa spends a great deal of the treatise laying the groundwork in order to lead his Muslim, and most likely Mu'tazili[265], audience to the doctrine of the Trinity. His structure seems to be fairly clear. The first part of the *risāla* is spent setting the context, and leading the Muslim reader from a place of agreement on the oneness of God to the concept of the doctrine of the Trinity, by first discussing issues concerning the divine attributes debate, and using language from that debate to lead the hypothetical Muslim reader from known to unknown. In this section, Abū Rā'iṭa only uses rational proofs and arguments, as well as Aristotelian logic, which he seems to presume his opponents will accept. In this way Abū Rā'iṭa appears to arrive at the doctrine of the Trinity logically, by first establishing that God has attributes of life, knowledge and wisdom, and afterwards using a number of analogies to illustrate his explanation, followed by biblical proofs which support the Christian conception of the nature of God over the Muslim one.

[265] That his Muslim audience is likely to be made up mainly of those of Mu'tazilī persuasion can be seen particularly in his *Al-risāla al-ūlā*, through the way he structures his various arguments leading towards the doctrine of the Trinity, by using language and concepts which would have been particularly familiar, or relevant, to a Mu'tazilī reader as discussed above.

It is not until his analogies section, that Abū Rāi'ṭa describes the godhead in the traditional Trinitarian terms of 'begetter, begotten and proceeding'. Meanwhile, in the *Ithbāt,* he begins with the analogy of light; introduces the unity of species through individual men having one human nature, using the terms substance (*jawhar*) and hypostases (*aqanīm*) throughout; and then describes God in terms of being existent, living and speaking, immediately explaining that this means 'a Father who does not cease to beget His Word, a Son who is begotten without time, and a Spirit who proceeds from Him without ceasing…'[266] This explanation of the doctrine is then followed by biblical proofs, before turning to address the Incarnation, whereas, in *Al-risālat al-ūlā* , Abū Rāi'ṭa deals with common questions which Muslims ask concerning the doctrine. The differences between the works in terms of the organisation of his arguments, do seem to suggest different purposes in terms of expected readership.

In both works, the sections containing biblical proofs are similar, with quotations concerning the Trinitarian nature of God taken most frequently from the Book of Genesis and Psalms, and the repetition of the account in Genesis of Abraham seeing three men outside of his tent whom he recognised to be the Lord. In the *Ithbāt,* Abū Rā'iṭa gives a few examples of the

[266] Keating, Defending the "People of Truth", 112.19-114.1

Word of God being God and then quotes the baptismal formula from Matthew 28:19, before stating that this is enough to answer the first of ‘their questions’ (concerning the Trinity) and moves swiftly onto the Incarnation. In *Al-risāla al-ūlā*, however, Abū Rā’iṭa cites more biblical examples, which not only refer to God’s Word but also His Spirit, in order to show that when Christians refer to Father, Son and Holy Spirit, they are merely referring to God together with His Word and Spirit. The detail in *Al-risāla al-ūlā* may suggest, as Keating claims,[267] that it is the latter of the two works in terms of date, but also must be linked to the type of work it is and its intended audience. Firstly, *Al-risāla al-ūlā* concerns only this one doctrine as opposed to a general exposition of Christian beliefs; and secondly, as it seems to be aimed at a more intellectually elite audience, be it Christian or Muslim, and so the treatise requires more engagement with the Muslim element of the audience and more detail in certain areas.

There are some terminological differences between the two works, which may or may not be significant. Māhiya, as will be seen in chapter five, seems to be a term that some of the Muslim *mutakallimūn* began to reject in relation to God and appears four times in *Ithbāt*

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[267] Keating*, Defending the “People of Truth”*, 162

compared to once in *al-Risala al-ūlā.*[268] Meanwhile, *ṣifa* appears 23 times in al-Risāla al-ūlā and only 9 times in the Ithbāt. Whilst there perhaps is not enough conclusive evidence concerning terminology, and indeed, as will be seen in the second part of this study, terminology appears not to be settled at this point, such frequency of occurrences, in conjunction with other evidence, may allow the tentative suggestion that the *Ithbāt* is aimed more at a Christian readership and the *al-Risāla al-ūlā* a Muslim one.

Aside from pure detail, there are two further ways in which the section containing biblical proofs differs in the *Al-risāla al-ūlā*. The first is that when making the argument about God using the first person plural in the Bible, Abū Rā'iṭa also adds in Qu'ranic examples of the same phenomenon, which he does not in the *Ithbāt*. Furthermore, he goes into much greater detail in terms of this argument, as if to directly show the Muslims that they must accept his evidence, as the use of the plural to speak about God is clearly there in their scriptures, and that they cannot escape this by trying to argue that it is permitted for a single person to use 'we' in the Arabic language. Even if it were permitted, he argues, such language would apply to man, who is a composite being, and not God. This goes beyond the argument in the

[268] This is not dissimilar to '*Ammār* who uses māhiya in his *Masā'il* but not at all in his *Burhān*

Ithbāt, which ends after showing that God refers to himself as ‘We’ in the Old and New Testaments.

The other main difference is that in *Al-risāla al-ūlā*, Abū Rā’iṭa addresses the matter of *taḥrīf*, albeit briefly. For Keating, even though it is only mentioned briefly, this issue of *taḥrīf* is responsible for determining Abū Rā’iṭa’s whole structure and agenda.[269] At the very least one must agree that Abū Rā’iṭa writes for an audience who will not necessarily accept biblical proofs: the proofs he does use appear to be rather supplementary to his argument concerning the Trinity, as seen above. Fundamentally, the Muslim belief or claim that Christian scripture had been corrupted meant that biblical proofs would not be accepted as credible evidence of whatever doctrine a Christian was trying to defend. It is this which forced Christian authors, faced with the Muslim challenge for the first time, to turn to other forms of argument, drawn both from their own tradition, innovation and the thinking of their Muslim counterparts.

[269] Keating, *Defending the “People of Truth”*, 156-7.

In style and method also, one can see the use of the dialectical tools which had become standard to *kalām* argumentation and discussion, both in the sense of posing a series of questions which would force the opponent to agree with the questioner, and in terms of the linguistic structure 'If they say… We say…' (*fā in qālū… qulnā*). That is not to suggest that this work was not written for a Christian, but that if it was, then this Christian would likely be another theologian looking to engage with the *mutakallimūn* on a much deeper and more intellectual level than a reader of the *Ithbāt*.

In terms of his overall presentation of the Trinity, there can be no doubt that Abū Rā'iṭa's understanding of God's nature is a traditional Christian one which would be expressed as one 'ousia' and three 'hypostases'. In both works which deal with the Trinity, one finds arguments and proofs drawn both from Christian scripture and the Greek philosophical tradition as assimilated and passed down by the Church Fathers. However, what one also finds is the borrowing of some Islamic terms, concepts and methods of argumentation, which has led some modern scholars to refer to Abū Rā'iṭa as a 'Christian *mutakallim*', one who presumably involved himself so deeply in an Islamic conceptual framework that he could be classed among those theologians who discussed religious questions in a distinctive manner,

and with an emphasis on finding divine truth through reason alongside revelation. The theme of the ‘Christian *mutakallimūn*’ will be explored in chapter six of the present study. Certainly, Abū Rā’iṭa’s awareness of his intellectual surroundings cannot be denied. The challenge of Islam was a novel one, and to some extent required a novel response. This can be seen in Abū Rā’iṭa’s works in terms content, structure and style.

From a close reading of the texts dealing with the Trinity, it would that appear that Abū Rā’iṭa was writing with two purposes in mind: firstly, to provide a reference for Christians to help them defend their beliefs in a Muslim Arabic context; and secondly to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to his Muslim counterparts in terms that they may understand.

From his works relating to the Trinity, Abū Rā’iṭa clearly understands the doctrine in a traditional Christian manner, but introduces it in such a way that it might be more acceptable to his Muslim counterparts. This is particularly the case with *al-Risāla al-ūlā*, which appears to be aimed more directly at a Muslim audience.

Beginning the treatise with a discussion of Christian and Muslim understandings of the term 'one', Abū Rā'iṭa then examines Muslim references to God as Knowing, Living etc. in the language of the divine attributes debate, before switching to a fundamentally Christian expression of the doctrine furnished with analogies and biblical proofs. In this way, Abū Rā'iṭa effectively holds up the two concepts of the unity of God side by side in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine as opposed to proving its truth. He does not go as far as to equate hypostases with attributes, but simply makes use of Muslim language and concepts to lay the groundwork so that the doctrine of the Trinity might be more palatable to a Muslim audience. Indeed, Harold Suermann, who explores Abū Rā'iṭa's use of the term *ṣifa*, concludes that, speaking of the divine attributes debate, 'Abū Rā'iṭa did not enter into it as such.'[270]

The most striking aspect of Abū Rā'iṭa's treatise is that he recognises the very crux of the problem that the Muslims have with the doctrine of the Trinity, that is to say the apparent contradiction of something being simultaneously one and three. This leads him to spend time examining the concept of 'oneness', in order to address the central concern of his Muslim

270 Suermann, 'Der Begriff Ṣifah bei Abū Rā'iṭa',

counterparts as effectively as possible, before using the language of the divine attributes debate to aid his clarification of the Christian conception of the nature and unity of God.

If his aim is to express the doctrine of the Trinity in Arabic for his fellow Christians, and to demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine for his Muslim interlocutors, then it would be fair to suggest that he succeeds as far as far as is possible. It is unlikely that he would ever expect his Muslim adversaries to accept his arguments to the point that they would be persuaded of the truth of the doctrine, but he may well have felt it possible that they might see the rationale of the Christian conception of the nature of God. Abū Rā'iṭa recognises that the issue between Christians and Muslims is their differing understanding of the term 'one', and therefore carefully places his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity after he's prepared the groundwork by discussing the terms relating to the oneness of God and the divine attributes debate. He never claims that the hypostases and attributes are identical, but simply lays the two concepts side by side. The use of traditional analogies in each of his works implies that, whilst Abū Rā'iṭa is aware of their likely rejection by a Muslim audience, he seems to feel they are useful for clarification purposes. In *al-risāla al-ūlā* he adds biblical

evidence along with a response to the accusation of *taḥrīf*, presumably in order to give as full a defence as possible in the face of Muslim criticism.

CHAPTER 4: ‘AMMĀR AL-BAṢRĪ (d.c. 840)

4.1. Background

4.1.1. Biography

The few available details of ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s life and activity are now fairly well known. Originally placed somewhere between the tenth and thirteenth centuries by Georg Graf, who found ‘Ammār’s name last on a list of Nestorian scholars after Ḥunayn Ibn Isḥāq (809-873 C.E.), there is now strong evidence to suggest that ‘Ammār actually lived during the early ninth century, thus being a contemporary of both Theodore Abū Qurra and Abū Rā’iṭa. The main piece of evidence is found in The ‘*Fihrist*‘ of Ibn al-Nadīm (d.c.995), who, in a list of works attributed to the early Mu‘tazilī scholar Abū al- Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d.c.840) includes one entitled ‘Against ‘Ammār the Christian in Refutation of the Christians’ (*Kitāb ‘alā ‘Ammār al-naṣrānī fi-l-radd ‘alā al-naṣārā*).[271] In addition, a reference found in one of ‘Ammār’s works to ‘a king of our time who left his kingdom with all of his soldiers for the Roman lands in pursuit

[271] Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist* , 204

of a woman in a citadel'[272], seems to refer to an expedition carried out by the Caliph al-Mu'taṣim (r.833-842) in 838. This theory is put forward by Michel Hayek[273], the modern editor of 'Ammār's works, and reiterated by Sidney Griffith in his various writings on 'Ammār[274]. Certainly in terms of the contents of 'Ammār's works, these rough dates would seem to make sense, as will be explored further in due course.

4.1.2. Historical Context

If his name and proposed dates of his life are to be accepted, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī lived in the city of Basra, close to the seat of the 'Abbasid dynasty in Baghdad, the heart of the Islamic Empire. Both cities at this time were flourishing as intellectual centres of Islamic thought, under the leadership of the 'Abbāsid dynasty, who had moved the seat of power from

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[272] Hayek, M. (ed.) *`Ammar al-Baṣrī: kitāb al-burhān. wa-kitāb al-masā'il wa-al-ajwiba*, (Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq: al-Maktabah al-Sharqiyah, 1977), 38.

[273] ibid

[274] See for example: Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*; 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's Kitāb al-Burhān: Christian Kalām in the First Abbasid Century' in S. Griffith, *The Beginnings of Christian theology*; and 'The concept of al-uqnūm in 'Ammār al-Baṣrī's apology for the doctrine of the Trinity' in S.K. Samir (ed.), *Actes du premier congrès international d'études arabes chrétiennes, Goslar, septembre 1980* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Studiorum Orientalium, 1982),169-191

Damascus, via Harran from 750 onwards, to Baghdad in 762. A great interest in learning and scientific knowledge on the part of early Abbasid caliphs such as al-Manṣūr (754-775), al-Mahdī (775-785), Harūn al-Rashīd (786-809), and al-Ma'mūn (813-833), stimulated an impressive translation movement of Greek learning into Arabic, often via the medium of Syriac. Prominent individuals including the scholar and founder of the Ḥanbalī school of law (*fiqh*) Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (780-855) and the Muslim philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (c.800-870) are associated with this area, along with Mu'tazila, who had emerged as the dominant school of Islamic thought at this time and had formed two branches in Basra and Baghdad under the leadership of Abū al-Hudhayl al-'Allāf (d.c.840) and Bishr ibn al-Mu'tamir (d.825) respectively.

Meanwhile, the region was also home to a number of Christian populations, the earliest perhaps adopting the faith at the beginning of the fourth century C.E.[275] Like 'Ammār, most of the Christians living in the region came from the so-called 'Nestorian' denomination (more properly called the Church of the East), although there were also some Jacobite communities in places such as Takrit and small pockets of Melkites who are supposed to have come to

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[275] Allard, Michel. 'Les Chrétiens à Baghdād', 375-388

Baghdad originally as prisoners and slaves.[276] A number of prominent individuals of the Church of the East certainly enjoyed respected positions such as Timothy I (d.823), who held the office of Patriarch of Baghdad for some forty three years, and Ḥunayn ibn Isḥāq (809-873) and his family, who are most famously associated with the translation movement under al-Ma'mūn.

During this period it is evident from a number of sources that Christians became active in theological debate with Muslims. Prominent Christian theologians were often invited to the Caliph's court to explain their beliefs, one of the most famous examples perhaps being the debate between Timothy I and the Caliph al-Maḥdī in 781 C.E.[277] where Timothy was called to answer questions about his faith and Islam. Other examples of *munāzarāt* or 'disputations', during which a scholar from one faith aimed to convince the other of his beliefs, seem to have taken place fairly frequently.[278] Moreover, the fact that Christian authors such as 'Ammār seem to have felt able to write polemical works under their own

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[276] Allard. 'Les Chrétiens à Baghdād', 377

[277] For more on this debate see: Newman, N.A. *Early Christian-Muslim dialogue: a collection of documents from the first three Islamic centuries 632-900A.D*. (Hatfield, P.A.: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1993)

[278] See: Keating, S. *Defending the "People of Truth*", 24-32

names suggests an intellectually open society and a degree of tolerance shown by Islamic leaders.[279] This is not to suggest that Christians were seen as equals or that they were not often put on the defensive in responding to challenges set by Muslims, but merely highlights the fairly open nature of 'Abbāsid society towards Christian intellectuals,[280] at least until the reign of al-Mutawakkil in 847.[281]

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[279] The three Christian authors at the heart of this study all appear to have written under their own names, although none of them refer overtly to the Muslims. Abū Qurra often addresses his works against the Jews although Muslims are clearly included as his opponents, Abū Rā'iṭa calls Muslims 'People of the South' and 'Ammār uses the phrase 'mu'min bi-l-wāḥid' (Believer in the One).

[280] Griffith acknowledges that 'Dhimmitude brought hardship and eventual demographic diminuition, but it also for a time brought with it a new cultural opportunity for the articulation and defense of Christianity in Arabic, within the world of Islam.' Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*, 17

[281] Al- Mutawakkil's reign proved to be a turning point in that he reversed the decree of his predecessor al-Ma'mūn (r.813-833) that the Qur'an was created rather than the eternal word of God, which al-Ma'mūn had forcibly imposed through the use of a type of inquisition called the *miḥna*. Although this meant an end to the persecution of those more traditionally minded Muslims who could not accept the doctrine of the created Qur'an, al-Mutawakkil did begin to take harsher measures against those who had preached the doctrine and Christians who had engaged in debates with them. It seems that al-Mutawakkil felt that allowing non-Muslims such freedoms was disruptive to society. Meanwhile, his decision to rely more heavily on Turks in his administration also meant that Christians were not perceived to be as useful in Muslim society as they had been previously. (Bogle, *Islam: origin and belief*, 60) Indeed, Abū Rā'iṭa's nephew, Nonnus of Nisibis, was imprisoned under al-Mutawakkil which may well have influenced his decision to write his apologetic treatise in Syriac as opposed to Arabic. Griffith, S. 'The apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis', *Aram*, vol. 3, no. 1 and 2 (1991), 115-6

4.1.3. Intellectual Context

Given that ‘Ammār lived at the heart of ‘Abbāsid society, in a city which saw the rise of Mu’tazila and the development of Islamic theology, and that Christians, particularly members of his own Nestorian denomination, had played an important role in the transmission of Greek philosophical thinking into Arabic, it is not surprising that ‘Ammār was in touch with Islamic thought. However, the extent to which his works betray an understanding of specific debates taking place among Muslims on issues surrounding the nature of God is striking. From the very outset of his discussion of the Trinity in his *kitāb al-burhān* (*Book of Proof*), ‘Ammār gives a telling description of a Mu‘tazilī belief about God, who, ‘they say is living and speaking yet [somehow] lifeless; He has no life and no word’.[282] From the fortunate discovery in Ibn al-Nadim’s *Fihrist*, there can be little doubt that this statement refers, in part at least, to a formulation attributed to the Mu‘tazilī scholar Abū al- Hudhayl al-‘Allāf (d.c.840), in his attempt to tackle the issue of how God’s attributes could be divine and eternal, but not compromise His unity.

[282] Hayek, *`Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 46.10

In terms of ‘Ammār’s Christian intellectual heritage, one finds among his two extant works the *kitāb al-masā’il wa-l-ajwiba* (*Book of questions and answers*). In structure the work appears to be a sort of systematic theology loosely along the lines of traditional works of the Greek Fathers such as Origen’s *On First Principles* and John of Damascus’ *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. Like these two works, the *Masā’il* is divided into four parts; each part being subdivided into smaller sections. In terms of content, the three works deal with similar topics in as far as they are all explaining elements of the Christian faith. They do vary in emphasis and specific subject matter, of course, as each work reflects its own time and context, and therefore each one is shaped by the intellectual currents and challenges which surround it. Being set against the backdrop of Islamic society, *The exposition of the orthodox faith* and the *Masā’il* contain more detail on the doctrine of the Trinity and the nature of the word and spirit of God, as well as a space dedicated to the Incarnation, and the use of ‘reasoned proofs’ as opposed to pure scripture.

Books of questions and answers also formed a common genre in the Syriac literature of the Nestorian Church to which ‘Ammār belonged. Parallels have been drawn between ‘Ammār’s *Masā’il* and the *Scholion* of Theodore bar Konī. Written in 792, the *Scholion* is a book of

eleven chapters, set out in the form of questions and answers. The first nine deal with Biblical books, whilst the sixth also explains a number of philosophical terms. Chapter ten and eleven deal with Muslims and heretical Christian sects.[283] Although the work is largely based on biblical texts, Sidney Griffith highlights the underlying philosophical and theological themes which underpin the work. These themes, he explains, are the same sorts of issues found in later Christian Arabic works such as those of ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī. Griffith refers to the *Scholion*, therefore, as ‘a manual of Nestorian theology, presented in response to the intellectual challenges of its day.’[284]

Within this setting of traditional Christian literature, in both Greek and Syriac, the production of a work like ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s *Masā’il* can be more clearly understood as both an exposition of Christian teachings explained in a manner similar to traditional Christian works but shaped by its particular intellectual and historical context, and also a work of apologetic, responding directly to the ever growing challenge of Islam and, as will be seen, mirroring the style and concerns of ‘Ammār’s Muslim counterparts.

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[283] Griffith, S.H. ‘Theodore Bar Koni’s *Scholion*: A Nestorian *Summa Contra Gentiles* from the First Abbasid Century’ in N. G. Garsoian, T.F. Matthews and R. W. Thomson (eds) *East of Byzantium: Syria and Armenia in the formative period* (Washington D.C. Dumbarton Oaks: 1982)
[284] ibid., 67

4.1.4. Works relating to the Trinity

To date, there are two extant works attributed to ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī: the *kitāb al-masā’il wa-l-ajwiba* (*Book of questions and answers*) and the *kitāb al-burhān* (*Book of proof*).[285] Michel Hayek suggests that the *Masā’il* is to be dated sometime after the accession of the Caliph al-Ma’mūn in 813, as in his opening to the work ‘Ammār praises the reigning caliph for his interest in a rational approach to religious matters.[286] Although the Caliph is not specifically named, under the circumstances al-Ma’mūn would seem to be the most logical guess. Hayek puts the upper end of the date range of this work at 818, when Abū al-Hudhayl is said to have left Basra for Baghdad.[287] Hayek’s reasoning is that he feels that this is the work to which Abū al- Hudhayl al-‘Allāf replied when he wrote his work ‘Against ‘Ammār the Christian’. However, there is no solid evidence that Abū al- Hudhayl was the recipient of this work. Although it is very likely from the content of the work that ‘Ammār not only knew of Abū al- Hudhayl’s teachings, but had them clearly in mind when writing them, it is not clear who was responding to whom, or even whether Abū al- Hudhayl would have read ‘Ammār’s works, as none of the Mu‘tazilī’s writings have survived.

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285 Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations*, 604-610

286 Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Basrī*, 93

287 Hayek, M. ‘Ammār al-Basrī: La Première Somme de Théologie Chrètienne en Langue Arabe, ou deux Apologies du Christianisme, *Islamochristiana* 1 (1975), 71

The *Burhān* can be dated a little more precisely to 838 or not long after in accordance with the reference to the 'king of our time' found in the introduction and mentioned previously. If the dating of the *Burhān* to 838 is correct, it is unlikely that Abū al- Hudhayl would have even read it, let alone responded to it, as it is thought that he died around 840 in Baghdad, at a great age,[288] and that he was senile for the last two decades of his life, which would mean he would not have written any works after about 820. 'Ammār's work does not name am explicit recipient, but makes reference to someone he calls the *mu'min bi-l wāḥid* (believer in the one) Although this reference to the *mu'min bi-l wāḥid* is obscure, it is well known that for the Mu'tazila especially, the unity and transcendence of God was held as perhaps the most fundamental tenet of their thinking by this time. It could be then, that the phrase is being used to subtly accuse 'Ammār's opponent of stripping God of his divine attributes, an argument which he explicitly uses in both works.

As the *Burhān* itself makes reference to a dateable event, and there is not enough circumstantial evidence to put a twenty year gap between the two compositions, it is probable that the *Masa'il* was actually written after 818 and anytime up to the death of the

[288] Nyberg, H.S. 'Abu al-Huḏayl al-Allāf', website available from: http://www.muslimphilosophy.com/ei2/allaf.htm; accessed 18/05/09

Caliph al-Ma'mūn in 833, if we accept that it is al-Maʻmūn who is being referred to. Like, the *Burhān*, the *Masa'il* may well have been a response to the thinking of Abū al-Hudhayl even though he had left Basra and was likely to be less *compos mentis* by that point, or, by the same token, may have actually been written with other Muʻtazilī scholars in mind such as Ḍirār ibn ʻAmr (c. 728-815) or al-Naẓẓām (d.c. 835-845), who also held similar beliefs on the unity of God. Indeed, as ʻAmmār makes no direct reference to his addressee, it is entirely possible that he is responding to a prominent strand of Muslim thought, which at this time would be Muʻtazilī thought, as he experienced it in Basra, rather than to one specific scholar.

Preserved by the Coptic Church in Egypt, ʻAmmār's two extant works survive in full in only a single manuscript, which is held in the British Library (dated 1297). A summary of the two works, made by the bibliographer al-Ṣafī ibn al-ʻAssal (fl. early thirtheenth century)[289] also exists in two manuscripts: one located in a monastery in Charfeh, Lebanon and the other in the Vatican Library.[290]

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[289] Al-Ṣafī ibn al-ʻAssal, along with his two younger brothers, wrote a great number of theological works. See: Meinardus, O. F. A. *Two thousand years of Coptic Christianity*, (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2002), 59

[290] Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim Relations*, 606

As its title indicates, the *Masā'il* is constructed as four sets of questions and answers: the confirmation of the eternity and oneness of God and verification of the origination of the world (twenty questions); the affirmation of the Holy Gospel (fourteen questions); the affirmation of the oneness of the creator in three hypostases (nine questions); and the reason for the incarnation of the Word and what follows it, on the uniting and the death and the resurrection (fifty one questions). Certainly many of the questions posed would be the sort of questions asked of Christianity by Muslims. However, the way in which they are systematically arranged and addressed to logically lead the reader to accept the truth of Christianity would suggest that 'Ammār has moulded such questions to suit a Christian agenda.

It is the third section of the work on God's oneness in three hypostases which is of paramount interest here, as it deals with the question of the Trinity. The section is composed of nine questions, although the ninth question is missing from the manuscript and is only indicated by a summary made by Ibn al-Assāl[291].

[291] Hayek, 'La première somme de théologie chrétienne en langue arabe', 115

The first ‘question’ immediately addresses the fundamental challenge posed by Muslims in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity: How can one be three and three be one? From this start point, the rest of the questions logically probe further into the doctrine, requiring ‘Ammār to deal with more detailed queries including: why Christians feel the need to establish a substantial life and wisdom for God; whether God needs his Word and Spirit; why Christians refer to the three aspects of the Godhead as three characteristics or individuals; why these three aspects should be referred to as Father, Son and Holy Spirit; why Christians cannot prove these names through rational measures; and how each of the hypostases can be a perfect divinity without there being three perfect divinities.

The *Burhān* is composed of twelve sections which together form a general apology for Christianity, clearly influenced by the challenge of Islam, much in the same vein as certain works written by Christian contemporaries such as Abū Qurra and Abū Rā’ita. The titles of the sections, where missing, have been provided by the Coptic scribe Abū Barakāt Ibn Kabar (d.1324) and Ibn al-‘Assāl.

The apology begins with a section on the ‘Confirmation of the existence of God’, which briefly lays out logical arguments for God’s existence, before pointing out that all of the Abrahamic religions believe that God is one. Even the dualists argue that there is one God, he says, although they place the devil alongside Him. ‘Ammār also quotes Plato and Aristotle claiming that they too were monotheists, indicating the importance and use of Greek philosophy in Christian and Islamic thought at the time. ‘Ammār then uses this section to set up the second chapter, his criteria for discerning the ‘true religion’[292], through an argument for the use of rational minds, since although God has ceased to send miracles or prophets, He is still a just God, and as such must necessarily continue to guide mankind. After outlining his criteria for the true religion the author’s third chapter illustrates how, according to reason, one should accept Christianity as the true religion. The following chapters deal more directly with Muslim accusations and concerns about Christian doctrines and practices. Chapter four responds to the Muslim accusation that Christians have falsified their scriptures, chapter five addresses the Christian belief in the Trinity, whilst chapters six and seven clarify the teaching on the uniting and offers proofs for the Incarnation. The last five chapters are concerned with other

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[292] For more see: Griffith, S. H. ‘Comparative Religion in the Apologetics of the First Christian Arabic Theologians’ in Griffith *The Beginnings of Christian theology.*

obvious discrepancies between Muslim and Christian belief and practice, such as the crucifixion, baptism, the Eucharist, the cross, and eating and drinking in the hereafter.

4.2. Setting the Context

In his two works, ‘Ammār sets the context for his explanation of the Trinity slightly differently. In the *Burhān*, the Nestorian theologian begins by attacking a Muslim position concerning the divine attributes of God; pointing out its contradictions before likening the concept of the attributes to Christian doctrine of the Trinity in a way that appears to suggest the two doctrines are potentially comparable and that the Trinity is a better expression of the nature of God. In the *Masa'il* his scheme is not quite so linear: whilst he deals with many of the same themes surrounding the Trinity, often in more detail, and criticises the Muslims position, his explanation is given by way of answering separate questions.

4.2. 1. What can be known about God

At the beginning of the *Masā'il*, Ammār confirms that God is one who is unique in His essence (*dhāt*), nature (*ṭabā'*) and eternity (*azaliyya*), with 'no equal in his substance and no resemblance between his actions and the actions of those whom he created'[293], something which he repeats in the *Burhān*.[294] The notion of partition in the Godhead is strongly rejected by 'Ammār, who points out that divisions and parts cannot be attributes (*ṣifāt*) of one who is bodiless or has no form.

> 'We have informed you earlier that He who created creatures with His Word and Spirit is without a doubt one in his substance and unique (*munfarid*) in His nature, division does not reach him, partition does not apply to Him.'[295]

'Ammār seems to stress this point for his Muslim audience. Indeed, it seems necessary for him to reiterate again and again that Christians fully agree with Muslims on the basic oneness of God, that they are monotheists, and that their doctrine of the Trinity does not allow or create partition, division or polytheism (*shirk*).

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293 Hayek. '*Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 149.9

294 ibid., 50.11

295 ibid., 153.1-2

The question of the nature of God is implicitly linked to that of what can actually be known about the divine being. The Neoplatonic notion which led to the concept of 'negative theology' in both religions was taken to the extreme by some Muslim thinkers of the time.[296] Therefore although ʻAmmār stresses the oneness, uniqueness and ultimate transcendence of God throughout both works, he is nevertheless keen to explain and defend the use of temporal analogy in describing the nature of God. In contrast to the Muslim position, the willingness of Christian theologians to use analogies and metaphors from the visible world in explaining the nature of God shows that for them, God could be 'known' and 'described' to some extent, as long as one kept in mind the inadequacy of human language and the limited nature of human knowledge.

Fully aware that his Muslim readers would not favour the use of analogy, ʻAmmār is very careful to point out that the only similarity between creator and created lies in shared

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[296] Early influential Muʻtazilites, such as Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Naẓẓām, strove to protect the utter transcendence of God through the use of negative theology, i.e. the ability to say what God is not rather than what God is, for example by saying 'God is knowing', one would actually mean that they deny ignorance of Him. Cf. Chapter 1, 56-61

Meanwhile the Jahmites, who took their name from their leader Jahm ibn Safwān (d.745), supposedly a contemporary of the earliest Muʻtazilites, stressed the complete inability of humans to know anything about God. For Jahm ibn Safwān , God had no characteristics at all, which represented an even more extreme position than Abū al-Hudhayl and his followers.

common names; there is no resemblance in the 'essence of their meanings'.[297] This is a point he repeats in both writings. In the 'Proof' 'Ammār illustrates this point by likening the use of analogy to a man asked to create an image or model of a king whom another person had never seen. The man would not be able to make the model see or hear or taste or move like the king himself can. Therefore whilst the model is a likeness of the king, it actually does not resemble him in any respect, which is analogous to Christian descriptions of God.[298] The use of analogy will be discussed further in Chapter 5.1.

After explaining and defending the ability to know something of God and the use of analogy to describe Him, 'Ammār turns to what we can infer about the nature of the divine being. From observing God's creation, 'Ammār tells us, it has to be concluded that there is the existence of only one pre-existent source ('ayn)[299] which made and created.

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[297] Hayek. *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 166.10

[298] ibid., 50-51

[299] 150.2. For a brief consideration of the term 'ayn. cf. Chapter 5, 338, n.478

The nature and actions of inanimate things indicate that they perform actions naturally, such as fire burning. A fire cannot choose to stop burning when it comes across wood, and its nature is recognised by the characteristics of these actions. In contrast, it is clear that God created the world intentionally and that he has the ability to abstain or refrain from creating as well as to create. He chose when to begin creating the world and chooses when to act. This proves then that God has will and volition, which can only be attributed to one who has 'speech' (*nutq*), that is to say one who is articulate and rational. Continuing with his argument, 'Ammār observes how animals instinctively perform actions in order to obtain sustenance, aspiring to nothing more than what they need to survive. Meanwhile, 'Ammār continues, it is clear that God created the world not to fulfil any need within Himself, but through choice.[300] As God is infinitely pre-existent (*qidam ğanā*) it follows that He was able to do without what He came to create later on, and placed Himself far above his creation which showed that he did not need to create the world for His own sake. If not for His own sake, then God's creation of the world must be an act of generosity (*jūd*) and grace (*na'ma*), qualities (*faḍā'il*) which can only come from one possessing wisdom. Altogether then, according to 'Ammār, this confirms the 'substantial nature' (*jawhariyya*) of God's Word and the eternity (*azaliyya*) of His Wisdom. By substantial nature, 'Ammar appears to mean the

[300] Hayek. *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 150.17-18

‘essentiality’[301] of God’s Word, that His Word is directly of or inherently linked to His substance or *ousia.*[302] He concludes:

> ‘And however you consider these creatures, your opinion compels you to be certain that whoever created them and whoever governs them is single (*mutawaḥḥid*) in his substance, triple (*muthalath*) in his characteristics without a doubt.’[303]

4.2.2. Criticism of teaching that God has no ‘Word’ or ‘Life’

After a short introductory paragraph to chapter five of the *Burhān*, ‘Ammār directly challenges his reader:

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301 The connotations of the word ‘substantiality’ in English (which would be a more faithful or literal translation of ‘*jawhariyya*’) would appear to be too concrete and material to convey the sense of ‘Ammār’s meaning here. Interestingly, it is possible that the connotations of the Arabic terms *jawhar/jawhariyya* were also too temporal to refer to God in the eyes of some of ‘Ammār’s Muslim readers. This will be explored further in chapter 5.3.

302 Later, ‘Ammār will explain that only word and life are of God’s substance, all other attributes are somehow derived from or rely upon these two. In the case of wisdom, as mentioned here, ‘Ammār will argue that only articulate, rational beings, that is to say those who have ‘word’, can be called wise.

303 ibid., 152.9-11. The argument from design, that is to say establishing the existence and unity of God through what can be seen in the universe, is not an argument which was alien to Mu‘tazilī thinking, indeed the proof of the existence and unity of God is the subject of al-Jāḥiẓ’s k. al- ‘ibar wa al-‘itibār (Book of advice and admonition). See: Abrahamov, *al-Kāsim b. Ibrāhīm,* 2-3. However, ‘Ammār’s conclusion about God being one and three would certainly have been refuted by his Muslim opponents.

> ‘Inform me, oh you believer in the One: Do you say that he is living? If he says yes, we say: Does He have life in His essence eternally, like that of the human soul [which] has a life in its essence which is substantial? Or an accidental life, like that of a body- a life which is received from another and does not have life in the essence of its substance?’[304]

In this way, ‘Ammār sets up the sort of logical dialectical question, found originally in Greek philosophical works, which is a key feature of texts composed by those who practised *kalām,* whereby he gives his opponent two options: either agree that God has an eternal life in His essence, and therefore agree with Christian teaching; or, say that the life of God is an accident, which no Muslim could accept. Considering that his opponent may reply that God has neither an essential eternal Life nor an accidental one, ‘Ammār responds pre-emptively by accusing him of avoiding the issue, and particularly avoiding the term ‘living’ so as not to be forced to affirm that God has ‘Life’. There can be little doubt that this argument is aimed at those of the Mu‘tazila, such as Ḍirār b. ‘Amr (c.a. 728-815), Abū al-Hudhayl or possibly al-Naẓẓām, who would say that God is ‘living’ but refused to say that God has ‘Life’ in the noun

[304] ibid., 48.17-20

form, for it was felt that that would imply a real distinct attribute alongside God, which would make Him a plurality.

By beginning with this statement of belief which he attributes to his opponent, ‘Ammār immediately takes up the problems and paradoxes created by such a formulation, in a manner not altogether unlike Abū al-Hudhayl’s Muslim critics, by focussing initially on the linguistic and grammatical difficulties caused by Abū al-Hudhayl’s formulation rather than the ontological aspect of the problem.[305] ‘Ammār asks his Muslim interlocutor:

> ‘…then how do you use the noun/name ‘the living’ (al-ḥay), when the name ‘the living’ is derived from ‘life’ (*al-hayā*), because we call the human being ‘living’ as long as

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[305] The desire among Muslims to understand the Qur’an, God’s word in a ‘clear Arabic tongue’ (26:195), meant that linguistic sciences such as grammar and philology were among the first to develop in Islam. As Richard Frank puts it, ‘…grammar is the first science to reach maturity in Islam—before the end of the second/eighth century—and it does so, almost completely apart from earlier and alien traditions, as a peculiarly Islamic science. This attention to language, most particularly the language of the Koran and to the grammatical and lexical structures and the characteristics of literary Arabic, had a profound influence on the formation and development of the *kalām…*not simply in their terminology but also in the manner in which many fundamental problems of ontology and ethics…were conceived, formulated, and analysed.’ ‘Frank, R M. *Beings and their attributes: The teaching of the Basrian school of the Mu‘tazila in the classical period* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1978), 10

> there is ‘life’ in him and if his spirit of life withdraws from him he is dead[306]…For we do not know [what] a thing is called except from what it has and not from what it does not have.[307]’

‘Ammār seems to be rejecting his adversary’s statement on two levels. Firstly, appreciating the importance of the science of grammar in Islamic thinking, he shows the formulation to be grammatically unsound, arguing that the name ‘the living’ (*al-ḥayy*) as found in the Qur’an must be derived from the noun life, therefore it is linguistically impossible to refer to a being as ‘living’ without having ‘life’. The adjective cannot apply without the noun as the adjective must be derived from the noun, according to ‘Ammār. The idea that the noun or ‘*ism*’ is at the base of everything is one which the Mu‘tazila would most likely have accepted in terms of the created world, but one which they rejected with regard to God. Whilst God could be called ‘Knowing’, He did not necessarily have ‘Knowledge’, a point which would be made and argued by different Mu‘tazilī scholars in different ways.

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306 Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 47.1-3

307 ibid., 47.6

On an ontological level, ‘Ammār explains that very ‘entity’ (*ma‘nā*) of ‘living’ is life and so by not affirming life one must necessarily affirm the opposite which is death. By denying God life, therefore, ‘Ammār’s adversary is making Him dead.

In the *Masā’il* too, ‘Ammār appears to be directly tackling the formulation posed by Abū al-Hudhayl concerning God’s relationship to his divine attributes.

> ‘But how can it be possible for rational minds to believe, [knowing] certainly that He is a substance above partition and division, that the meaning of the statement of the one who says ‘does not cease to be living’ is the [same as the] meaning of his saying ‘does not cease to be wise?’[308]

As discussed in Chapter One, Abū al-Hudhayl’s formulation that God’s attributes were ‘He’, i.e. identical to His essence, created a paradox which his Muslim contemporaries were quick to point out. If the attributes were identical to God, then how was it possible to distinguish between them, or why would they need different names, such as ‘living’ and ‘wise’, if they

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[308] ibid., 153.2-4

were identical to Him and presumably therefore to each other as well? From the passage above it seems that ‘Ammār also picked up on this difficulty, thus involving himself directly in the internal Muslim debate concerning the divine attributes, and showing logically that God must have an existent and distinct ‘Life’ and ‘Word’ in order for Him to be deemed ‘living’ and ‘speaking’.

‘Ammār recognises that in calling God living, wise and so on, Abū al-Hudhayl and his peers are wanting only to deny lifelessness and ignorance of Him, but if they deny Him life and wisdom, he points out, then surely they are achieving exactly the opposite of what they had intended.

> ‘He [the Muslim] has fled from confirming the Word and Spirit because he might be forced to allow three entities (*ma‘ānī*) in the essence of the Creator…’ [309]

‘Ammār’s accusation is that by reducing God to one who is single in entity, who has no life or word in his essence, his Muslim counterparts are reducing God to a mere accident or

[309] Ibid., 48.8-9

capacity, unable to subsist in Himself. In fact, in ‘Ammār’s opinion, they are actually obliterating the Creator completely, stripping Him of his attributes, and making Him no more than the idols which were worshipped in pre-Islamic times.[310] The Christians, he says, do not do this; they attribute to God the most perfect of what they know. This again, is something he repeats in both works.[311]

4.2.3. God’s relationship to His Word and Life

In each of his sections on the Trinity in his two works, but more explicitly in the *Burhān*, ‘Ammār explains the doctrine of the Trinity by likening it to the internal Islamic debate pertaining to the divine attributes of God. Having demonstrated in the *Burhān* that God must have Word and Life, he states:

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[310] Interestingly, the accusation of stripping God of his magnificence put ‘Ammār alongside opponents of the Mu‘tazila in this respect, agreeing with those such as the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal on one side, and the followers of Ibn Kullāb on the other, who all felt that the Mu‘tazila, in their attempt to preserve God’s unity and transcendence, were actually going so far that they were to be accused of *ta‘ṭīl*, that is to say ‘emptying’ or ‘divesting’ Him of his divine attributes.

[311] Ibid., 51.20-22 and 164. 3-5

> We do not say of God that he is three divinities, rather we do not want in our teaching of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, to do anything more than give clarification on the statement that God is living and speaking. So we mean that the Father is the one who has life and word. And the life is the Holy Spirit and the word is the Son…'[312]

This apparently direct equation of the Son and Holy Spirit with the attributes of life and word, within the Mu'tazilī framework of the doctrine of the attributes, is quite remarkable. For although 'Ammār has been innovative in logically leading his argument to this point, what he seems to have done is to reduce the Son and Holy Spirit to attributes of God, which no Christian would accept, and from what follows, as will be seen in the following section, it seems that it is not what 'Ammār himself actually believes. However, if 'Ammār is taken to be equating hypostases with attributes, he has placed himself firmly into the framework of the divine attributes debate and therefore also into the 'firing line' of his Muslim opponents. Up until this point, the potential distinction between Muslim attributes and Christian hypostases remained a possible loophole. With this statement, however, 'Ammār appears to have all but

[312] ibid., 48.18-20

committed himself fully to the Islamic debate and therefore is subject to criticism according to the dictates of that framework.

In order to see this argument through within the framework of the divine attributes debate, ‘Ammār must logically show why the attributes of ‘word’ and ‘speech’, which are only two of many attributes of God in Islamic thinking, should be related to God’s essence in a special way. This explanation takes up a large part of his *Burhān* and is also found in his *Masāil.* In essence ‘Ammār sets out to show how all other attributes can be seen to somehow rely on or derive from the two substantial attributes of word and life. This argument, referred to in this study as the “attribute-apology” will be addressed in more detail towards the end of this chapter and in Chapter 5.5.

In the *Masā’il*, the “attribute-apology” is followed by a more typically Christian explanation of God’s relation to His Word and Spirit, although still framed in the discourse of the *‘ilm al-kalām.* ‘Ammār does this by answering a question on whether God requires His Word and Spirit or not. ‘Ammār directly dismisses the question as absurd. How can one ask whether

the Creator needs something which is naturally of the substance? Here he is using logical reasoning to criticise the question itself as erroneous: to answer in the affirmative would suggest that God is somehow lacking without His Word and Spirit, and to answer in the negative would prompt the question as to why the Christians speak of Him in these terms if He does not actually need His Word and Spirit. Instead ‘Ammār attempts to clarify that God's Word and Spirit are inherent to his substance, with the effect that one cannot speak of Him ‘needing’ or ‘not needing’ them. He uses an analogy to illustrate his point:

> ‘Or what would you say if someone were to ask you: ‘Does fire need its heat and dryness, and does water need its coldness and moistness? … you know that the natural constitution (*sūs*) of the substance of fire is heat and dryness, and the natural constitution of the substance of the water is its coldness and moistness.’[313]

The implication by analogy is that word and life have a similar relationship or stature in terms of the substance of God. The term *sūs* appears in both of ‘Ammār's works, here in conjunction with '*jawhar*' and later with ‘*dhāt*'. It is a word which is not common amongst

[313] ibid., 159.6-9

Arabic- speaking Christian theologians[314] or their Muslim contemporaries, seems to mean something along the lines of nature, natural constitution or origin.[315]

What it appears ‘Ammār is trying to say here is that heat and dryness are key elements of fire, so much a part of the nature of fire or of the natural constitution of the substance of fire, that fire could not be called fire without them. It is not that he is suggesting that fire needs these elements or characteristics as such, but that these elements are so much a part of the entity of fire that the question of needing them is absurd in itself. In a similar manner, if God is God, then He must be living and rational or articulate. This is how ‘Ammār deals with the original question put to him, whether God needs his Word and Spirit. In keeping with the methodology of *kalām* disputation, neither potential answer as set up by his hypothetical interlocutor can be accepted, therefore it must follow that the statement or question is absurd.

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314 Rachid Haddad notes that the anonymous author of ‘La Somme des aspects de la foi’ uses the term *sūs*, amongst others, in place of *ṭabī'a*, though the example he gives refers to the nature of man rather than God. Haddad, *La Trinité divine,* 165

315 See: Lane, Edward William. *An Arabic-English lexicon* (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1968), 1466 Lane gives the. example *الفصاحة من سوسه* meaning ‘eloquence is [a quality] of his nature’.

4.3. Explanation of the Trinity

4.3.1. Four ‘Categories’

Despite the apparent comparison of attributes to hypostases, one soon realises that ‘Ammār’s conception of the Trinity is actually a fairly traditional one. Although he holds the two concepts up side by side, ‘Ammār, in both of his works, gives an explanation of the term hypostasis which makes it clear that an *uqnūm* could never be a *ṣifa.*

As a premise to discussing the use of the terms *jawhar* (*ousia*, substance) and *uqnūm* (*hypostasis*) in relation to God, ‘Ammār reminds his reader, in both works, of the four basic categories into which everything falls: substance (*jawhar*), capacity (*quwa*), accident (*‘araḍ*) and hypostasis (*qunūm*). In the *Burhān*:

> ‘For you know that things must fall into four categories. Either substance, as one might say ‘human’; hypostasis such as one might say Moses and David and Solomon; capacities like heat of fire and rays of the sun; or an accident like blackness of something black and whiteness of something white. The most perfect of these four things are substances (*jawāhir*) and hypostases (*aqānīm*) For all substances have

this capacity like heat to the fire, rays to the sun, and they also have the ability to support accidents. Every substance also has two capacities such as the earth having coldness and dryness; water having coldness and moisture; fire having heat and dryness; and air having heat and moisture. They are therefore single in their substances and tripled in their entities. And the hypostases too, as one could say of Moses, David and Solomon, that each one is subsistent in himself, not needing the others, whereas accidents and capacities are single in their entities, they cannot stand by themselves like the substance and the hypostasis, they have need of the substance which supports them and in which they exist.'[316]

His description in the *Masā'il* is very similar.[317] 'Ammār's argument is that of the four categories which are made known to humans, Christians attribute the most perfect, self-sufficient ones to God, whereas Muslims stress God's simplicity to such an extent that they

[316] ibid., 51.5-14

[317] ibid., 162.6-11 '…either a substance (*jawhar*) which is like the entire human, and fire, water and what is similar to these things. Or one of the capacities (*qūwa*) of the substance, and that is like speaking for the human, heat [in relation to] fire, humidity to water and so on, which establishes the essence (*dhāt*) of the thing and its quiddity (*māhiya*). Or the accident (*'araḍ*) in the substance, so this is like the whiteness in snow or blackness in tar and length, width and shortness and such similar things. Or the hypostasis (*qunūm)* from the substance, so this is like the human being in his soul and his body from the human race, and like the angel Gabriel in his particular hypostasis from among the angels, and what resembles this from the spiritual and corporeal hypostases…'

make Him no better than capacities or accidents, both of which are simple, cannot stand alone, and have need of substances to support them in order to exist, unlike the categories of substance and hypostasis. By implication, an attribute (*ṣifa*), would have to be an attribute **of** something, and therefore is similar the categories of capacities and accidents, in that it is not a self-subsistent entity, like a hypostasis.

'Ammār's categories appear to be loosely based on Aristotelian ones, four predicables which will always fall into one of the ten categories or predications which he lists as: substance, quantity, quality, relation, place, time, position, state, action, and affection. In Aristotle, the four predicables are accident, genus, peculiar property and definition. Accidents and particular properties are non-essential, whilst a genus such as 'animal', for example, and a definition such as 'horse' are essential.[318] 'Ammār's schema, which is also found in Theodore bar Konī[319], has clearly been adapted to suit his Christian agenda, and therefore would seem to be representative of this aspect of Greek philosophy as passed down through the Nestorian church. The schema, in this particular form, does not appear to be referred to in

[318] Smith, R. 'Aristotle's Logic', *The Standford encyclopedia of philosophy*, available from: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/; last accessed 7/3/11

[319] Cf. Griffith, 'The concept of 'al-uqnūm', 185

contemporary Muslim sources, though Muslims do often attribute to Christians the Aristotelian notion that all things must be either substance or accident.[320]

Shortly after discussing the ‘four categories’ in the *Masā’il*, ‘Ammār challenges the Muslims by commenting that it is surprising that intelligent people would refuse to call God a substance with specific hypostases but then would allow the ‘simple capacity’ and ‘needing accident’, both of which are imperfect and limited in that they cannot exist independently. The Christians, he points out, have only spoken of God using the best of terms available, implying that the Muslims have, in fact, done the opposite.[321] This is another argument upon which he elaborates in the *Burhān.*[322] It is highly unlikely that any Muslim would actually allow God to be considered a simple capacity or accident. What ‘Ammār appears to be implying, however, is that by making God strictly one and simple, and by refusing to conceive of the divine

[320] Most of the Muslim *mutakallimūn* would also have adhered to this principle, though only in terms of temporal beings. For them, God transcends such categories.

[321] ibid., 163-164

[322] ibid., 51-52

nature in terms of substance and hypostases, his Muslim opponents are forced to speak of God as an accident.[323]

From the Islamic side, these terms, which ‘Ammār seems to feel Muslims will accept, if they appeared at all in Islamic thought, had somewhat different connotations to his usage of them. *Jawhar* and ‘*araḍ* both appear in Islamic thought but together had a distinctive role in the field of physical theory or ‘Atomism’, as developed by some of the Mu‘tazilī thinkers, and significantly Abu al-Hudhayl. *Al-qūwa* does not appear to be a Mu‘tazilī term. As for the term *qunūm*, as a transliterated loan word from Syriac it would have been introduced by Christian thinkers and not used within Islamic circles, although we know Muslims were aware of the term as Christians used it, as it appears in most of the extant Muslim works referring to the

[323] Here again, one finds the implication that all things fall into one of four categories. This is something which Muslims such as al-Warrāq (Thomas, *Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*, 100) and later al-Bāqillānī reject. Al-Bāqillānī addresses a Christian claim that everything must be either substance or accident and dismisses it by arguing that whilst such rules may be true for the created world, they cannot be said in relation to God. Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 144

Trinity from the early ninth century and beyond.[324] The Arabic terminology used by Christian authors in relation to the nature of God will be explored in more detail in Chapter 5.3.

4.3.2. 'One and three' is not a numerical issue

The question of oneness and threeness, which he clearly knows is troublesome for his Muslim counterparts, is one which ʻAmmār addresses directly in the question of the third part of the *Masā'il*. ʻAmmār begins by clearly stating that the oneness and threeness of God is not a numerical issue.[325] What the Christians mean, when they talk about the Trinity, is that God is 'one eternal substance who does not cease to be existent by three properties (*khawāṣṣ*) or essentialities[326] (*jawhariyyāt*) which are not dissimilar or distinctive or separated.'[327] Drawing fundamentally on Aristotle's 'unity of species', ʻAmmār sets out to show that God is not one

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[324] See for example the works of Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq (d.c.864) in Thomas, *Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* ; Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d.c.870) in Périer, A. 'Un traité de Yaḥyā ben ʻAdī'; and Al-Nāshi' al-Akbar (d.906) in Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 19-77

[325] This is an argument which Abu Rā'iṭa uses as the basis of his defence of the doctrine of the Trinity in his *Al-risāla al-ūlā*, whereby he goes into more detail on Aristotle's categories. Cf. Chapter 3, 162-7

[326] Cf. n. 35

[327] Hayek, *`Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 149.3-4

or three in number, but that he is one in '*ousia*' or substance (*jawhar*) with three characteristics or properties (*khawāṣṣ*).

In the *Burhān*, 'Ammār does this by using analogies of the human soul, fire and the sun. Firstly he aims to show that without their respective characteristics each of these substances could not be given that name, for instance, without light and heat the sun could not be referred to as the sun; and secondly how having three aspects does not necessarily invalidate the unity of a being. Although one can discern between the sun, its light and its heat, one would not refer to it as three suns.[328] Here, however, 'Ammār is careful to distinguish between the hypostases of God which are perfect in themselves and not lacking or depending upon anything, as opposed to the light and heat of the sun, for example, which are merely an illustration. He does this by responding to a question from his possibly hypothetical interlocutor about this. The term 'hypostasis', he explains, is something used in reference to God alone in order to recognise the perfection of God, which ultimately no analogy can achieve. The use of analogy is simply to show how a single thing can be recognised as three entities, 'whereby calling its entities three does not invalidate its oneness

[328] His other analogies include the word and life of the human soul, and the radiance and heat of fire.

of substance.'[329] The main example given in the *Masā'il* is that of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob being three individual men, but at the same time sharing a common human nature;[330] one wouldn't refer to them as being three different human species.

4.3.3. '*Al-uqnūm*' and the relationship between substance and hypostases

The substance and hypostases are therefore the most perfect of all the categories, according to 'Ammār. Before he can move on to explain the relationship of the divine hypostases to the substance of God, however, 'Ammār feels it necessary to explain the meaning of the term *aqānīm*. The Muslims, it would appear, ask the question of why Christians call the three characteristics or properties (*khawāṣṣ*) of God three individuals or persons (*aškhāṣ*), yet not three gods. This question is particularly fascinating, as it provides an insight into why Christian authors used certain Arabic terminology and particularly why 'Ammār chooses to use the transliterated Syriac term *qunūm* to denote the Greek term hypostasis as opposed to

329 Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 50.12-13
330 ibid., 171-2

any Arabic translation,[331] a question which will be dealt with in part two of this study, alongside other terms used to describe the nature and unity of God.

In response to the question, ‘Ammār explains that the original statement is incorrect, that the Christians do not use the term ‘*shakhṣ’* because it connotes ‘a [physical] body limited by measurements and characteristics’[332], but prefer the term *qunūm*.

> We did not call them three individuals (*ashkhāṣ*) and nobody should imagine that we have called [them] individuals because for us the individual (*shakhṣ*) [means] each body (*jism*) defined by its measurements and limbs that separate between him and other bodies. Rather we called them in the Syriac tongue three *aqānīm*.[333]

The term *khawāṣṣ* (properties), it would seem, has been employed thus far by ‘Ammār, as a kind of temporary alternative to *aqānīm* (hypostases), until the above passage where he introduces and explains the term *aqānīm* properly. From this point onwards, the appearance of the term *khawāṣṣ* in his writings is significantly less, though he seems to retain it in some

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[331] In connection with this issue see: Griffith, ‘The concept of al-uqnūm’.
[332] Hayek, *`Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 162.2
[333] ibid., 162.1-3

places as a way to describe temporal or human analogies of the Trinity, as the perfection of the hypostases means that they should only be used to refer to the Godhead.[334] In the fifth chapter of the *Burhān*, the term *khawāṣṣ*, is not used at all, with the term *ma'ānī* (entities) used in its place.

It is possible that, because a *khāṣṣa* would have to be a property **of** something and therefore dependent on something else, the term did not correctly denote the relationship of the hypostases to the substance, which, as 'Ammār has already told his reader, are independent and self-subsistent. Therefore, although maybe useful as a way to introduce the concept of *al-uqnūm,* 'Ammār may well have felt that the term would be problematic in terms of his model of the Trinity.

The Syriac term for hypostasis, he says, means the specific perfect source (*al-'ayn al-khāṣṣ al-kāmil*) not lacking anything or wanting in any respect. In attempting to find appropriate terms to describe the unity and existence of God, he tells his reader, the Christian leaders:

[334] ibid.,163

'…could not find in the perceived things anything more perfect in its essence (*dhāt*) or higher in its quiddity (*māhiya*)[335], or self-sufficient in itself (*aghnā bi-nafsihi*)…so for that reason they called it a substance (*jawhar*). And they saw in this one substance known properties (*khawāṣṣ*), which informs us of the actuality of the original creative cause *('ayn al-'illa al-aṣliyya al-khalāqa*) and its spirit and its word'[336].

What 'Ammār is expressing here, is a model of the Trinity which follows in the tradition of the Greek Fathers, who distinguished between what is common to the whole Trinity, that is to say of the substance of God, and what is particular to each individual hypostasis. The 'original creative cause' refers to the Father, who differs in hypostatic property to the Son (Word) and Holy Spirit (Spirit) in being the cause, principle or source of the other two hypostases.[337] The best way to describe the perfection of these properties, 'Ammār tells us,

[335] *Māhiya* is a philosophical term meaning quiddity or essential nature, literally 'whatness'. Cf. Chapter 5.3.

[336] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī,* 162.19-163.3

[337] The debate over the procession of the Holy Spirit, and whether it was caused by the Father alone (or *through* the Son) or whether it was caused by the Father *and* the Son, known as the '*filioque* controversy', is one which became increasingly important during the ninth century. Cf. Chapter 1, 47, n 58 'Ammār's description is clearly one which follows in the tradition of the Greek fathers, as one would expect.

from the names available to them [the early church], was hypostasis. And so they called them hypostases.

As for the relationship between the substance and hypostases, ‘Ammār further explains that two of the four categories, which he mentioned previously, are independent, and they are the ‘general substance’ (*al-jawhar al-‘āmm*) and ‘specific hypostasis’ (*al-qunūm al-khāṣṣ*)[338], whereas the other two cannot stand alone. The idea of the hypostases being the specific or particular, as set against the common or general substance was not new in terms of Christian thinking, and yet are not directly employed by either Abū Qurra or Abū Rā‘iṭa. There are, however, one or two references to be found in Muslim polemical texts, which may shed some light on the concepts. The Mu‘tazilī al-Nāshi’ al-Akbar (d.906) refers to the teaching of the ‘Trinitarians’, that ‘the Maker is three hypostases and one substance: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, so the substance is the hypostases in a general way.’[339] David Thomas, the modern editor of al-Nāshi’’s work who reads the word as ‘general’ (*ma‘mūman*), does so on the basis of two other texts containing similar terms. One is by philosopher Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī (d.c.866-873) and the other is by the early ninth century theologian Abū ‘Īsa al-

[338] Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 162.14

[339] Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 36

Warrāq.[340] Al-Bāqillānī (d.1013), whose refutation of the Christians has been shown to rely on that of al-Warrāq[341], also refers directly to the *al-jawhar al-'āmm* and asks what it is: 'Tell us about the common substance that combines the hypostases…'[342]. The Jacobites and Nestorians, he claims, say that the substance is not other than the hypostases and the question is of whether the substance and hypostases are identical or differentiated. Al-Bāqillānī's argument is that if the substance, which the Christians claim is undifferentiated and uncountable, is the hypostases, which are differentiated and countable, and they (the hypostases) are the substance, then the substance must also logically be differentiated and countable.

A little further on, 'Ammār introduces a 'specific substance' as contrasted with the general 'comprehensive' (*shāmil*) substance.[343] Each hypostasis being a perfect specific substance

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[340] ibid, 37 n.3

[341] ibid., 132

[342] ibid., 159

[343] Book 5 of Aristotle's *Categories* refers to the 'primary' and 'secondary' substances; the former being particular such as an individual man, and the latter being universal and generic such as 'mankind'. In Trinitarian terms, Wallace-Hadrill notes, God became this universal substance and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit became 'substantial realities'. John Philoponus followed this logic, we are told, and was denounced for it by Severus of Antioch. For Severus the categories should be reversed, with the unity of God as the primary term due to the indivisibility and oneness of the substance and the hypostases being second in rank. Meanwhile, John Chrysostum appears to have coined the phrase

does not require that they are three substances and therefore three divinities, but instead one general comprehensive substance and therefore one God.

Al-Warrāq, in the opening paragraphs of his *Against the Trinity*, says of the Nestorians, Jacobites and Melkites that:

> 'They all claim that these three hypostases are uniform in substantiality and differentiated in hypostaticity, that each of them is a specific substance, and that the one comprehensive substance is common to them.'[344]

Al-Warrāq continues to address the Trinity in terms of general and specific substance repeatedly throughout his refutation. Therefore, despite not being specifically referred to in such terms by Abū Qurra and Abū Rā'iṭa in their works on the Trinity, it would seem that the concept was a common one in the ninth century eastern Christian context.

'particular substance' in reference to the incarnate Word. Wallace-Hadrill, D.S. Christian Antioch: A study of early Christian thought in the East, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 93-95

[344] Thomas, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"*, 66

Using a human analogy, ‘Ammār demonstrates that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob each have a specific perfect substance, but that they as humans are not three complete substances.[345] They all have the same one ‘human’ substance. Likewise, he says, each of the eternal properties is a complete substance because of their superiority and height above capacities (*al-qūwā*) and ‘wanting accidents’ (*al-a‘rāḍ al-muḍtarra*). Therefore, the three hypostases are one comprehensive divinity and so not three complete gods but one general comprehensive God.[346]

Here we see ‘Ammār coming towards a standard Christian explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity as one *ousia* and three hypostases, each of the hypostases being perfect, independent and differentiated amongst themselves, but at the same being inseparable from the substance.

[345] This analogy is also common to Abū Qurra and Abū Rā’iṭa, who adopt Aristotle’s unity of species to aid their explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity, though they do not phrase their explanation in terms of general and specific substances.

[346] Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 172 Al-Warrāq rejects this argument in exactly the same way as he rejects most arguments concerning the doctrine, by returning to the question of whether two entities are identical or different from one another, in this case whether the general substance is identical to the specific substance or different from it. Thomas, “*Against the Trinity*”, 98-100

In the *Burhān*, ‘Ammār's explanation of the relationship between substance and hypostases is much less detailed, possibly as his main approach is likening the Trinity to the Muslim teaching that God is ‘living’ and ‘speaking’, as will be discussed further later on. His focus, therefore, is much more on God's ‘Life’ and ‘Word’, and how they relate to the substance or essence of God, rather than a more traditional clarification of the doctrine of the Trinity.

4.3.4. Biblical Proofs

Following on from the clarification of the nature of the hypostases in the fourth question of the *Masā'il*, the fifth question then hypothetically asks why the hypostases should be called Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

‘Ammār responds that these were the terms used by the Apostles, who were qualified to use such names. Beginning with the author of the first gospel, Matthew, ‘Ammār quotes 28:19 ‘Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. He admits that references were ambiguous early on, but that it was necessary so that the people would not assume the Fatherhood and Sonship to be like a human fatherhood and sonship, that is to say one associated with physical procreation. Quoting John 1:1: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God', 'Ammār explains how John named the Word a son, that God was the Son in the attire of the Messiah and that he testified to the Spirit and eternal life, and that the Spirit proceeds from the essence of the Father.[347]

According to 'Ammār, his opponents find these names shocking as they cannot understand the terms fatherhood and sonship except through partnership and intercourse; they cannot grasp or comprehend the nature of a being in non-human terms. If this is the case, he continues, his Muslim adversaries should also deny that God is compassionate and merciful or great and mighty, if they can only understand these attributes in human terms. Once again he stresses that even if God shares common names with his creatures, there is absolutely no resemblance in the essence of their meanings.

[347] Cf. John 14 and 17

Returning to the explanation of these names for the three hypostases, ‘Ammār states once again that the people of past ages would not have been able to understand that the Fatherhood and Sonship of the godhead was not like the human relationship. It was only when the Son incarnate appeared that this relationship between the three hypostases needed to be explained. Likewise, the names given to God were all inspired from his revealed books; God informed people of the names and attributes he had selected for himself, it was not for the people to innovate alone. This statement could well be a reproach aimed at the likes of Abu al-Hudhayl who was one of the first Mu‘tazilites to analyse the Qur’an in terms of the names and attributes of God. What he felt one was able to do was to take words and grammatically reform them to derive different parts of speech. This was due to the fact that one not only finds names in the Qur’an such as ‘the Knowing’ (*al-‘alīm*)[348], but also instances of God having ‘Knowledge’[349]. Therefore Abū al-Hudhayl appears to have felt justified in identifying attributes from various terms and parts of speech related to God, not necessarily just His names.[350] Unsurprisingly, the Mu‘tazila were condemned as innovators by more conservative and literalist scholars for taking this approach. It is possible that ‘Ammār is also criticising this practice.

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348 For example, Qur’ān 2:115

349 For example Qur’ān 67:26

350 Ess, Theologie und Gesellschaft, IV, 441-442

In the fifth chapter of the *Burhān*, 'Ammār's only set of biblical references are those which confirm that God has Word and Spirit. Quotes such as Job 33:4 'The spirit of God created me…'[351] and Psalm 33:6 'By the Word of God the heavens were created and by His Spirit the totality of their forces (*junūdiha)'*[352] serve as two references to the Word and Life or Spirit of God, and also appear in the *Masā'il* .

After showing that God's Word and Spirit are mentioned repeatedly in the Bible, in the *Masā'il* 'Ammār uses biblical quotations to construct the argument that God refers to Himself in all of his books both in the singular and the plural, thus implying the Trinitarian nature of his being. Beginning with Gen. 1:26 Ammār explains:

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351 Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, in the *Burhān*, 'The Spirit of God created me', 48.13-14 and in the *Masā'il* 'The Spirit of the Lord created me', 161.3

352 Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 48.12-13 and 161.3-4

> He said: “We create man in our image and likeness. He doesn’t say “my image” or “my likeness”, nor in “our images” or “our likenesses”, but in “our image and our likeness”: by that He implied His singleness and tripleness in one saying.[353]

In this passage, ‘Ammār points out, God used the words ‘our image’ and ‘our likeness’, not ‘my image’ and my likeness’ nor ‘our images’ and ‘our likenesses’. Therefore God indicated his simultaneous threeness and oneness by using a plural possessive pronoun (‘our’) with a singular noun (‘image’; ‘likeness’).

None of the numerous uses of ‘we’ found in God’s books, ‘Ammār argues, could be used to refer to one person, in the sense of what would today be called the ‘royal we’. This is not the case in Syriac, Hebrew, Greek, nor indeed Arabic, he states. He continues defending this argument, by refuting the potential claim that when God said “Come, let us divide the languages”[354], he was talking to the angels, for He did not need their help to do this.[355]

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[353] ibid., 160.4-6 Ammār uses the verb *khalaqa* for ‘create’ and *basharan* for ‘man’.

[354] Gen. 11:7 Abū Rā’iṭa’s version is the same as this and identical in both his works except he uses the verb *ta‘ālū* (‘Come’) and farraqa (to divide) Keating 116.15-118.1 and 202.1; Dakkash, 92.1. ‘Ammār uses *halammū* instead of *ta‘ālū* and the verb *qasama* instead of *farraqa*.(*Masā’il*)160.6

Presumably, this was the typical response of Muslims to the use of the first person plural in the Qur'an; that either it is the majestic plural, or that God was referring to himself and others, for example, his angels. The use of this 'plural' argument is one commonly used by Arabic-speaking Christian authors of this period, and, as such, will be discussed further in the second part of this thesis.

One other biblical reference he includes in order to support the argument that God points to His own Trinitarian nature in the Bible is the following:

> And He says at the beginning of the commandments[356]: "Hear O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one." God is bringing to their attention [that] the threeness in His properties are one in substance.'[357]

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[355] The two biblical passages used here in support of the 'plural argument' are also both found phrased in a very similar manner in Theodore bar Koni, whose *Scholion* may have been a source upon which 'Ammār drew. Bar Konī, *Livres des scolies*, 208. The plural argument, however, appears to be a common one by 'Ammār's period, which can also be found in the Jacobite and Melkite traditions, and which is explored further in chapter 5.2.

[356] This is a reference to the Shema found in Deuteronomy 6:4 as opposed to the commandments at the beginning of Exodus 20.

[357] Hayek, 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, 161.1-2

‘Ammār suggests that the repetition of the word God/Lord three times at the beginning of the passage indicate that God is three, whilst also stating explicitly that God is one.[358]

These biblical proofs are designed to support ‘Ammār’s argument that God’s Trinitarian nature is indicated in scripture and that His Word and Life or Spirit are the most important substantial properties, which forms the basis of his central argument concerning the Trinity in the Burhān. The use of biblical proofs in the three authors who form this study will be further discussed in chapter 5.2.

4.4. Response to Muslim questions

Having likened the divine attributes of ‘living’ and ‘speaking’ to the hypostases of the ‘Son’ and ‘Holy Spirit’, ‘Ammār faces a natural subsequent question from his Muslim interlocutor(s) as to why he calls God living and speaking, but does not also affirm that God is hearing, seeing, wise, knowing, merciful, generous, willing and so on.

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358 Abū Rā’iṭa makes a similar argument about Isaiah 6:3 in which the angels praise God by repeating the word ‘Holy’ three times. Cf. 183

‘Ammār initially refers to the separation of the names and attributes of God into divine acts and what he terms ‘properties’ (*khawāṣṣ*) of the essence,[359] once again betraying knowledge of the progression of the divine attributes debate, as discussed in Chapter One.[360] There is some debate as to how early this distinction took place; Van Ess suspects that Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Naẓẓām may have gradually accepted it and that even Ibn Kullāb avoided it for a while,[361] although Ibn Kullāb’s formulation that all attributes were ‘neither He nor other than Him’ would suggest that he would not have needed to make such a distinction. Al-Ash‘arī uses the term *ṣifāt al-dhāt* in reference to all three of them, but it is unclear whether this is a later categorisation used anachronistically by al-Ash‘arī, or a term actually employed by the scholars he is referring to.

Certainly among later generations of the Mu‘tazila the distinction was made, as we are told by al-Ash’arī in his Maqālāt that Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā’ī (d.915) did not accept hearing as an essential attribute.[362] The number of essential attributes, however, varied according to different scholars and different times, for example, Bishr al-Marīsī (d. c. 833-842), at an early

[359] Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī,* 156
[360] Cf. Chapter 1.3.
[361] Van Ess*, Theologie und Gesellschaft* V, 436
[362] ibid., 492

stage of the attributes debate, only discussed four: volition (*mashī'a*), knowledge (*'ilm*), power (*qudra*) and creativity (*takhlīq*)[363]; whereas later on Bāqillānī (d.1013) stated that there were fifteen. Most settled on seven or eight as mentioned above.[364]

'Ammār's initial reaction, therefore, is to question the intelligence of bringing up such a point: 'why did you bring up the argument with all that it contains of your differences one and alike?'[365] How are the Muslims able to question him about other attributes when they themselves cannot agree on the number of essential attributes?

In response to the question of why the Christians accept three aspects or characteristics but not others, 'Ammār explains that all substances vary in terms of hearing, sight, power and so on and yet still remain the same substance, but that life and speech are different, in that they distinguish different types of beings.

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363 Watt, W.M. *The formative period of Islamic thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 199

364 Van Ess *Theologie und Gesellschaft,* Band V, 435

365 Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī* ,146.10-11

All animals and humans have life and all humans have speech, even if a human has some defect whereby he cannot speak out loud, he still has the substantial nature of speech (*jawhariyyat al-nutq*)[366] engraved (*al-maṭbū'a*) within his essence. The basis of 'Ammār's argument here is that there are three types of being: inanimate, animal and human. Inanimate things are lifeless; animals are living; humans are living and articulating. This is true and constant for each of the three types of being, it is not possible to have animals who speak, or rocks that are alive, or humans that do not speak. Other characteristics, or attributes, as he goes on to show, differ among those of the same type of being and across types of being. With regard to hearing and sight, he continues, they differ in that they are not in the quiddity of the substance (*māhiyat al-jawhar*) and so animals and humans do differ amongst themselves in terms of ability to see or hear. In the *Burhān*, he adds that these attributes should be treated metaphorically, as it is clear that these are faculties attributed to bodies, and God has no body.[367] In reference to God, he says, 'all-hearing' and 'all-seeing' actually mean omniscient, for, as humans, we perceive and comprehend things through our hearing and our sight, and so God has spoken to us in a way which we might understand. [368]

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[366] ibid., 157.8

[367] This is something with which the Mu'tazila would agree. Cf. al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, 155.3 and 301-306

[368] The 'deanthropomorphisation' of Qur'anic terms was a key Mu'tazili concern, deemed necessary to protect the transcendence of God. Anthropomorhic references to God such as His having body parts

Power, strength and capability have two different aspects: one is physical strength, which, like hearing and sight, is also common to both humans and animals, and the other spiritual (*ruḥāniyya*) and psychological (*nafsāniyya*); that is power which requires the wisdom of the soul (*ḥikmat al-nafs*) and reflection of the mind (*rawiyyat al-'aql*).[369] This type of power belongs to the 'gentle soul' which has the ability to command and forbid[370], subjugate animals and govern affairs of the world. God's power is his word, by which he does all of these things.[371] Here, 'Ammār links word to power more directly, in order to explain the status

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like hands (38:75) and a face (55:27) were to be read metaphorically, as nothing created could resemble God. In an article entitled 'The speech of God', A.S. Tritton explains that according to some Muslims of the time, in sura 9, verse 6 the word ''hear' is to be explained as "understand".' Tritton, A.S. 'The speech of God', *Studia Islamica,* 36 (1972), 6

It is also possible here that 'Ammār is aware of the position of the 'baghdādiyyīn' (those of the Baghdad branch of the Mu'tazila) who claimed that to say God is hearing and seeing means that He is knowing or knowledgeable of things that can be heard and seen. al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt*, 168

369 Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī* ,157.19. 'Ammār also takes time in the Burhān to explain that Word has four aspects which are: word as heard through the voice; word as seen written on a page; word generated in the soul but not yet expressed through the mouth or on paper; and the power to assess and manage affairs (49). This description is not unlike one found in John of Damascus' *Exposition*, who gives similar categories and then explains: 'God therefore is Word essential and enhypostatic: and the other three kinds of word are faculties of the soul and are not contemplated as having a proper subsistence of their own.' John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 17

370 This could be a conscious echoing of Islamic language: God's ability to command and forbid formed one of the five central tenets of Mu'tazilī doctrine.

371 Once again, this language is reminiscent of Qur'anic teaching concerning God's power to create by simply using His Word, "Be." Cf. Suras: 16:40, 36:82, 40:68.

or position of that attribute without needing to allow it as an added attribute.[372] God's power is his word.

Likewise, will and volition have two aspects: one being instinctive will as seen in animals who do only what is necessary for their sustenance; the other being the will to choose, as seen in humans. The only way in which our human will differs from the will of the animal is by the virtue of articulation or rationality which allows us choice, so it cannot be said to be of the core of the essence and structure of the substance in the same way that life and speech can.

Attributes such as mercy (*al-raḥma*), grace (*al-rā'fa*), justice (*al-'adl*), patience (*al-ḥilm*), magnanimity (*al-jūd*) and grace (*al-ni'ma*) are seen to be effects (*ma'lūlāt*) of those who speak and are able to reflect. You won't see a merciful donkey or a just camel, 'Ammār tells his reader in the *Masā'il*. 'And that is for the lack of the substantiality of the cause (*'illa*) from

[372] This seems to be a common counter argument made by Muslims who ask why 'power' is not recognised as an essential attribute along with life, word, knowledge, existence, or whatever combination of 'attributes' Christians use to describe the hypostases for their Muslim audience. See for example: al-Bāqillānī in Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 152ff.

which the previously mentioned effects are generated.'[373] None of these things can take the place of speech in the natural constitution of the substantiality (*binyat al-jawhariyya*). In the *Burhān* such attributes are deemed to be created actions, rather than subsisting in God's essence. Moreover, 'Ammār explains, 'these actions only related to one who is speaking…'[374], again showing word or speech is somehow at the basis of other attributes.[375]

Finally 'Ammār comes back to wisdom and knowledge, which can only be related to those who are rational beings, who are able to speak: '…we do not say we saw a "knowing donkey" or a "wise ox"…'[376] He then cites Aristotle and Galen as examples of men who are regarded as being wise and knowing. Likewise it is clear from the word of God that He is both wise

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[373] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 158.10

[374] ibid., 53.14-15

[375] As discussed previously, the question of the distinction between what came to be commonly called 'attributes of the essence' (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*) and 'attributes of action' (*ṣifāt al-fi'l*) is not a straightforward one. Certainly by the time al-Ash'ari was writing his *maqālāt* in the late ninth or early tenth century, it seems there was an accepted distinction and he uses the two terms frequently when referring to thinkers before him. However it is not entirely clear whether the thinkers he refers to actually made such clear distinctions themselves and it is therefore possible that he uses these terms somewhat anachronistically.

[376] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 55.2

and knowing, which means that wisdom and knowledge are derived from the word[377].

‘Ammār explains:

> We arrive at this [position] because we find life and speech of the core/natural constitution of the essence (*sūs al-dhāt*) and from the structure of the substance *(binyat al-jawhar*).’[378]

This argument is quite intriguing, and, whilst it is found in both works, forms a major part of his section on the Trinity in the *Burhān* and the basis of his “attribute apology” as will be explored in Chapter 5.5. By showing how life and speech are superior to God’s other attributes, ‘Ammār lays the groundwork for the natural step of equating God’s ‘life’ with the Holy Spirit and His ‘speech’ with the Son.

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[377] A. S. Tritton tells us that ‘…according to al-Bāqillānī the Mu‘tazila affirmed that God had no names or qualities till he created speech with which other parts of His creation could talk about Him’. Tritton, ‘The speech of God’, 21-22. This provides another interesting line of argument for other attributes being derived from speech, although here speech is said to be quite definitely created, which is not what ‘Ammār is saying and does not appear to be what his addressee would argue either.

[378] ibid., 52.13. The term ‘binya‘ does not appear in either Abū Qurra or Abū Rā‘iṭa’s writings on the Trinity, and the only indication of it being used in a related sense in Muslim writings is found in a work by Mu'ammar Ibn Abbād (d. 834), where he refers to ‘burning’ belonging to the ‘structure of fire’ (*binyat al-narr*). Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, III, 240

The ninth and final 'question' in the third section of the *Burhān* is unfortunately missing from the London manuscript, and also has parts missing from the Charfeh manuscript too. However, part of it has been reconstructed by Ibn al-'Assāl so that one might have some idea of its content. The question, according to Hayek, concerns each of the members of the Trinity and whether they are living and speaking. If the Christians say no, then they make the hypostases lifeless; if they say yes then each hypostasis would have life and speech, which would cause multiple attributes and destroy the Trinity. This is an argument which the late tenth centrury Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbār puts forward, attributing it to 'our masters' (*shuyūkhunā*), that if all the hypostases are all divine and the Christians attribute Word and Life to the godhead, then each of the hypostases must have Word and Life; and, as the Father has a Son and Spirit, so must the Son have a Son and Spirit, if the Son is also divine and shares his being or substance with the Father.[379]

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[379] Thomas, *Christian Doctrines*, 240-244. Al-Bāqillānī makes the same argument, ibid., 169 Interestingly, 'Abd al-Jabbār likens the Christians to the *Kullābiyya* in this respect, whose beliefs he says are 'similar in meaning even though they differ in expression', 244.5-6 and whose teaching he actually finds more appalling than the Christians, as the *Kullābiyya* allow a number of distinct eternal attributes as opposed to the Christians who only claim that there are three.

The response which follows is one which is used extensively by Theodore Abū Qurra in his work on the Trinity.[380] Using human analogies such as the eye and the ear, ‘Ammār explains that it cannot be said that both man **and** his ears are hearing or that both man **and** his eyes are seeing, but that he is one hearer and one seer. This, by implication, is the same for the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who are not all three of them living and speaking individually, but that they have one Life and one Word. The difficulty for ‘Ammār is, that once again, because he appears to have placed the hypostases firmly within the realm of the divine attributes debate he is vulnerable to attack on those grounds. As such, it is clear in Muslim thinking that an attribute cannot have an attribute of its own and so the Trinity is attacked in these terms.

4.5. Discussion: ‘Ammār’s understanding of the nature of God

In terms of content, the sections on the question of the Trinity in each of the works are similar and give the reader a picture of ‘Ammār’s understanding of the nature of God and his presentation of it in a Muslim Arabic context, which might suggest that they were written

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[380] Cf.: Graf, G. (ed.) *Arabischen Schriften des Theodor Abu Qurra, Bishofs von Harran (ca. 740-820): literarhistorische Untersuchungen und Ubersetzung.* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1910); and Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*.

more closely together than the twenty years which Hayek suggests is between them. Beginning from a common starting point in both works, ‘Ammār emphasises that God is one, nothing resembles Him. He explains the doctrine of the Trinity, showing how God can be one and three without compromising his divine unity, and that the doctrine of the Trinity is the most fitting way to describe the nature of God, as can be seen from both the temporal world and revealed scriptures. Defending the use of analogy and metaphor to describe God, ‘Ammār is keen to justify the use of the terms substance and hypostasis as the most perfect of what humans know. The hypostases are named Father, Son and Holy Spirit according to scripture.

The chapter in the *Burhān* is structured according to the argument that the Muslim position on the unity of God is illogical and that the Trinity makes much more sense, as God’s word and life are equivalent to the Son and Holy Spirit of the Trinity. The section in the *Masā’il*, however, is not so much structured along the lines of this single argument, although many of the same elements of the argument can be found. Instead it deals with various sub-themes surrounding the nature of God as Trinity, and explaining that not only does the Trinity not amount to polytheism, but that it is actually the most appropriate way to conceive of God.

Whilst the sections on the Trinity in the *Masā'il* and *Burhān* are closely related in terms of subject matter, they do vary in style, tone and emphasis. The *Masā'il* is set out like a Christian exposition in the style of a book of questions and answers, which has led some modern scholars to think of it as a sort Christian manual like the *Scholion* of Theodore Bar Konī.[381] 'Ammār is obviously aware of and responding to the Islamic context in which he finds himself, but overall the work is much more explanatory, and the questions he deals with, whilst motivated by Muslim concerns, are set up and answered according to his own Christian agenda. The fifth chapter of the *Burhān*, on the other hand, displays a much more direct engagement with Muslim thinking and has more of a polemical feeling to it, even though both works are fairly similar. 'Ammār clearly does not feel the need to introduce the concepts behind his arguments, which are often specifically related to Islamic theology, which may suggest he is writing for Muslims who share the technical logic, language, and background knowledge of his argument. In the *Masā'il* his explanations and arguments are no less complex and certainly more detailed in terms of explanation, and again refer to elements of Muslim teaching without much expansion. 'Ammār's tone in the Masā'il appears to be less polemical, which might be attributed to the structuring of the work as questions put

[381] Griffith, ''Ammār al-Baṣrī's Kitāb al-Burhān', 152 n.23

to the Christians, and potentially to the likelihood of the work functioning as a manual for Christians to use in debates with Muslims.

The *Burhān* is a more concise work, whereby arguments and supporting proofs are usually more succinct. This can be seen particularly in terms of biblical proofs, the only ones which appear in the *Burhān* are five instances which refer to God having a Word and Spirit, whereas in the *Masā'il* he also employs the 'plural argument' which relies on biblical references that can be interpreted as God indicating His Trinitarian nature. More knowledge is assumed in the *Burhān*, particularly in relation to 'Ammār's criticisms of Mu'tazilī teachings, as detailed above.

The Syriac term *qunūm* is introduced and explained in the *Masā'il* and then used throughout the *Burhān*, which would seem to corroborate the idea that the *Burhān* is the later work, or perhaps that it is assumed the reader of the *Burhān* will not need an explanation concerning the unsuitable nature of the term *shakhṣ*. Meanwhile other terms such as *māhiya* and *'ayn* do not appear in the *Burhān*, and *khawāṣṣ* is replaced by *ma'ānī*. Once again, one might

speculate that this suggests the Burhān to be the later work, as terms like *māhiya* and *khawāṣṣ* may well have been problematic for a Muslim audience and therefore rejected. The other likely explanation for the differences noted above, is that the two works are aimed at slightly different audiences, though there is not enough solid evidence to put forward either theory with confidence. The *Masā'il* is structured as a detailed manual of Christian doctrines and practices explained as a series of answers to the sorts of questions Muslims would have been asking, potentially for the use of Christian scholars to defend their faith; whereas the *Burhān*, or certainly the section on the Trinity in the *Burhān*, is a more polemical piece of writing, very much focused on criticising the Muslim *mutakallimūn* and expressing the doctrine of the Trinity in the language of the divine attributes. The question of audience will be further addressed in reference to all of the authors included in this study, in part two.

In order to engage with his Muslim readers, 'Ammār acknowledges that, for them, God is 'speaking' and 'living'. If the Muslims acknowledge that God is 'speaking' and 'living' then, according to 'Ammār, they must accept that He has 'Word' and 'Life' as a logical consequence. Furthermore, evidence from God's created world and Holy Scripture also point to God's having a word and 'life' or 'spirit', which are the most superior characteristics or

attributes, again being inferred from philosophical logic, the natural world or scriptures. The Christians, he says, refer to the Son as the ‘Word of God’ and the Holy Spirit as the ‘Life of God’, and therefore implies that Christian and Muslim teaching on the unity of God is not completely dissimilar.

What is particularly noteworthy about ‘Ammār’s writings on the Trinity, and in particular the *Burhān*, is the fact that not only does he defend Christian doctrine, he actively criticises a certain Mu‘tazilī conception of the unity of God, likens the divine attributes debate to the Christian conception of the Trinity almost to the point of equating hypostases with attributes, and then explains the doctrine in traditional Christian terms in order to show it to be not only reasonable, but a preferable alternative to the Muslim conception of God.

‘Ammār’s point, therefore, as close as he comes to equating attributes with hypostases, seems to be that the two doctrines are not completely dissimilar and that there are inherent problems with Muslim conception of nature of God as well. In this respect, it would appear he is successful in achieving this. In terms of persuading his Muslim opponents of the truth of

the doctrine, unfortunately ‘Ammār’s use of the attributes debate and his near equation of hypostases with attributes meant that he “dipped his toes”, as it were, into the conceptual framework of a Muslim debate and therefore would be subjected to the dictates and logic of *kalām* , where his arguments could easily be refuted according to that logic.[382] What ‘Ammār’s efforts highlight, is that Christians and Muslims were working in fundamentally different conceptual frameworks, that hypostases could never be attributes, and neither faith were likely to be convinced by the other’s arguments.

Nevertheless, it is likely that ‘Ammār was aware of this, his knowledge of Islamic thought indicates, as does his biography, that ‘Ammār would have been living at heart of Islamic society during the formative period of Islamic intellectual thought. It is clear from available sources that Muslims knew Christian doctrines well enough to state them accurately, even if they make no effort to understand them. And this may well have informed ‘Ammar’s project: he perhaps knew Islamic thought and his opponents well enough to know that he would not convince the Muslims, but perhaps felt that he could explain the doctrine to them in a way

[382] Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq does exactly this with an argument very similar to ‘Ammār’s central argument concerning the reliance of all attributes on ‘Word’ and ‘Life’. Thomas, *“Against the Trinity”*, 130-132

that would demonstrate its reasonableness through terms and concepts that were familiar to them.

It would seem that ‘Ammār’s understanding of the nature of God is a traditional Christian understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, but that in explaining the doctrine, ‘Ammār is very much aware of and responding to the Islamic intellectual context. In both works he is picking up on an internal Islamic debate and using it to help him explain the Trinity. In so far as he does this it would appear that he is being fairly creative; introducing the doctrine of the Trinity through Muslim language and concepts. Whilst ‘Ammār remains fundamentally loyal to his Christian beliefs by trying to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity to his audience through the use of traditional Christian methods such as analogy and biblical proofs, his employment of philosophical and ontological arguments based on the Muslim debate over the divine attributes suggests an element of creativity and opportunism, which arose from a deep involvement in, and awareness of, Islamic society.

PART TWO: THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF CHRISTIAN EXPLANATIONS OF THE TRINITY IN ARABIC

CHAPTER 5: THE TOOLS OF CHRISTIAN ARABIC APOLOGETIC AND POLEMIC

In constructing their respective treatises concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī each use a variety of tools, arguments and proofs in order to persuade their reader, whether Christian or Muslim, of the reasonableness of Christian teaching concerning the nature and unity of God.[383] The arguments used will be explored in more detail here; their employment, origins and reactions to them, in order to trace the continuity and originality of Christian proofs for the Trinity and subsequently aid the discussion concerning the role of Arabic-speaking Christian theologians in Islamic society and their engagement with Muslim theology, which will follow in the final chapter of this thesis.

[383] As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the question of audience is a peripheral though not insignificant topic in relation to the central research question, and, as such will addressed in chapter six of the present study.

5.1. Analogy and Metaphor

The use of analogy and metaphor to speak about the divine being is one which has a long history in the Christian tradition. As Humphrey Palmer puts it, 'some terms which religious people apply to God are not to be taken precisely in their ordinary sense, nor yet in a totally different sense, but in a special and related sense…'[384] Such thinking seems to have stemmed from the fusion of the God of the Old Testament, who created man 'in His own image'[385] and the Platonic conception of the material world. In the Christian mind, therefore, the nature of God can be discerned, albeit only faintly, as the temporal world is an imperfect and inferior reflection of the perfect eternal realm. On the basis of this, that is to say the acceptance of the use of analogy in relation to God, natural analogies were considered to be useful in making difficult and abstract theological concepts, such as the doctrine of the Trinity, a little more intelligible for the human mind.

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384 Palmer, H. *Analogy: A study of qualification and argument in theology* (London: Macmillan, 1973), 15

385 Cf. Gen 1:27, Gen 9:6

All three Christian authors examined in this thesis employ Trinitarian analogies in their Arabic works relating to the unity of God. Their aim is to show, in a readily understandable manner, how something which is recognised as one can have aspects which are distinguishable, in that they can be referred to individually, but which do not imply partition within the entity, or that these aspects are separate entities alongside it. One specific example which is common to all of the authors is the sun, which along with its rays of light and heat, is likened to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in that the sun has these three distinguishable features of itself or its disc, heat and light, yet is still one and the same sun. Other clearly popular analogies include the light of three lamps in a house, three men sharing one common human nature, the relationship between Adam, Eve and Abel, and the relationship between the human soul with its intellect and speech.

Abu Ra'ita tells his reader:

> 'You see the sun and it is the cause *('illa*) of its rays and its heat. Similarly the fire is the cause of its light and heat and has never been without its light and its heat.

Similar is the teaching about the Son and the Spirit: they are both from the Father, eternal from eternity without [temporal] precedence of the Father over them.'[386]

Abū Qurra uses the sun analogy (among many others) to stress that although one can distinguish between Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three hypostases, it is not possible to say that they act independently of each other.

> 'You say that the sun gives light to humans and you are correct in [saying] this. And you say that the rays of the sun give light to humans and you are correct. But you do not say that the sun **and** its rays give light to humans because the sun gives light **through** its rays.'[387]

In a similar manner, he goes on to argue, one could say that the Father created the world, or one could say that the Son created the world, but one could not say the Father **and** the Son created the world as this would imply two creators. The Father, we are told, created the world **through** the Son (and Holy Spirit).

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[386] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī*, 99, sect. 172, lines 4-9. This is a typical and traditional Eastern model of the Trinity, whereby the father is the cause of the Son and Holy Spirit, though does not precede the Son and Spirit in time.

[387] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 37.20-38.2

For ‘Ammār, one of his concerns is to show that Word and Life, which are equated with the Son and Holy Spirit, are substantial to God, without which He could not be called God.

> ‘Likewise the sun, with is light and heat is called “sun”, and if it loses its light and heat it would darken and become cold and it would not be called “sun”.’[388]

Another common analogy is that of three men sharing one human nature, which appears in all three authors. At the beginning of his section concerning rational proofs, Abū Qurra uses the analogy of individual men sharing one human nature, in order to show the way in which something can be said to be counted simultaneously as one and three.

> ‘If you wanted to count Peter and Jacob and John and they are three persons having one nature and their nature is ‘man’. Then it is not right if you apply number to ‘man’ which is the nature of them, so that you say three ‘mans’. If you do, you cause their

[388] Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 49.19-20

single nature, to which the name ‘man’ refers, to be different natures and fall into ignorance.’[389]

In both of his works relating to the Trinity, Abū Rā’iṭa employs the analogy of Adam, Abel and Eve[390] which he seems to feel reflects the relationship of the hypostases in a more suitable manner than other analogies, as Adam is the begetter, Abel the begotten, and Eve the one who proceeds from Adam’s rib. In the *Ithbāt*, Abū Rā’iṭa speaks of the Son and Holy Spirit as:

> ‘…two perfects from a perfect…like the relation of Abel and Eve to Adam, who are both from him [Adam], two perfects from a perfect, one substance, three hypostases, each one distinguished from the other in its eternal property related to it, I mean, Fatherhood, Sonship and Procession, with their perfection and their unity together in the substance.’[391]

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389 Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 34.1-5

390 Keating, S. *Defending the “People of truth”*, 114, and Dakkash, *Abū Rā’iṭa al-Takrītī*, 79-82, 86, 90

391 Keating, S. *Defending the “People of truth”*, 114

A similar analogy can be found in the *wujūd al-khāliq*, where Abū Qurra discusses Adam's virtues resembling God. He points out that, like God, something was begotten of him and something proceeded from him.[392]

'Ammār does not use this analogy, instead preferring those relating to the sun, fire and the soul. In the *Burhān* he tells his reader:

> 'And you may find that the soul and its word and its life are one soul and the fire and its heat and its light one fire, and the sun and its light and its heat make one sun. And making it three did not invalidate the unity nor the other way around.'[393]

Despite their clear partiality to, and ease with, Trinitarian analogies, it is worth noting that all three authors are careful to stress the ultimate transcendence of God and the inferiority or only partial resemblance of analogy as a tool to help explain the divine nature. The notion of the ultimate mystery of God was by no means something novel in Christian explanations of the Trinity, but the repeated emphasis of this point may

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[392] Dick, *Maymar fī wujūd al-khāliq,* sect. 24

[393] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 49.20-22

well have been for the benefit of their Muslim, and particularly Mu'tazili audience, whom they might have known had a dislike of analogy.

Despite this Muslim distaste for likening God to aspects of the created world, Trinitarian metaphors and analogies were, and remained, very much a part of the Christian apologetic tradition. They can be found in some of the earliest works of the Greek fathers and in those of the generation before our three authors alike. Analogies of light and the sun are particularly common in the works of the Church Fathers as a tool to clarify their teachings concerning the nature of God and the relationship and status of the Son and Holy Spirit. As early as the second century, Justin Martyr (100-165 C.E.) described the distinction of the Father from the Son as light from the sun, not only in name but in 'person' i.e. numerically distinct.[394] Athenagoras (c.133-190) referred to the Holy Spirit as 'an effluence of God, flowing

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394 Goodenough, Erwin R. *The theology of Justin Martyr: an investigation into the conceptions of early Christian literature and its Hellenistic and Judaistic influences* (Amsterdam: Philo Press, 1968), 146. Justin also describes the Holy Spirit as an 'effluence from God, from whom it emanates and to whom it returns like a ray of sun' or as light from fire'. Barnard, L. W. *Justin Martyr: his life and thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 102

forth and returning like a ray of the sun'[395]. Tertullian (c. 160-c. 220) spoke of God and His Word as 'two objects, but only as the root and the tree are two distinct objects, or the fountain and the river, or the sun and its ray…'[396] Later on, in the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa explains that we are aware of the rays of the sun but not the actual sun itself as an analogy of knowing or feeling the power of God but not God himself.[397] The Greek Fathers were also known to use the analogy of Adam, Eve and Abel in their works, which both Abū Qurra and Abū Rā'iṭa use.[398]

John of Damascus, writing his Fount of Knowledge as a compendium of Christian beliefs in the early years of Islamic rule, also uses a number of analogies to describe the nature of God. In establishing the necessity of the existence of God's Word and Spirit, John likens the situation to the necessity of the human word and spirit, in that, for example, the word comes from the mind but is neither identical to the mind nor completely separated from it. He does point out, however, concerning the Spirit that,

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[395] Prestige, G. L. *God in Patristic thought* (London; Heinemann, 1936), 88

[396] ibid., 104

[397] Ayres, Lewis. *Nicaea and its Legacy: An approach to fourth-century Trintarian theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004)

[398] Haddad, *La Trinité divine*, 122

although the human word does have spirit, in the human case the spirit is something different from our substance (*ousia*).[399] Later on, John speaks of fire and the light which proceeds from it and which exists alongside it as a metaphor for the Father and Son, and uses the same analogy that both Abū Qurra and Abū Rā'iṭa favour concerning Adam, his son (John of Damascus uses Seth, Abū Rā'iṭa uses Abel) and Eve, to show the relationship of Father, Son as Holy Spirit as begetter, begotten and the one who proceeds.[400]

Two of the earliest instances of Christian theological engagement in Arabic which are known to us today are an anonymous text dated to the latter half of the 8th century and a now fairly famous debate between the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I and the Caliph al-Mahdi in 792. The anonymous apology was given the title *On the triune nature of God* by its first modern editor, Margaret Dunlop Gibson in the late nineteenth century, but is also often referred to as Ms. Sinai 154.[401] The debate

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[399] John of Damascus, *Exposition*,

[400] ibid., 8

[401] Gibson, Margaret Dunlop. *An Arabic version of the Acts of the Apostles and the seven Catholic epistles : from an eighth or ninth century ms. in the Convent of St. Catharine on Mount Sinai : with a*

between al-Mahdi and Timothy was conducted in Arabic, although only remains today in Syriac translation.

In *On the triune nature* the author uses a number of analogies to explain God and His Word and Spirit as one God and one Creator. The first example given is that of the sun, its rays of light and its heat which is referred to as one sun, rather than three. In the same way this author gives a range of examples, much like Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, such as: the human soul, body and spirit; three men sharing one human nature; and three lamps creating an indistinguishable or inseparable light. He then goes onto illustrate with a number of other analogies involving the eye, (pupil, light); tree root (branch, fruit); fountain (river, lake) and mouth (tongue, word). The author, however, is careful to stress the ultimate mystery of God and our inability to fully understand His majesty.

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treatise, On the triune nature of God, with translation from the same codex, Studia Sinaitica no. 7, (London: C.J. Clay, 1899)

Timothy I also uses various metaphors from the very beginning of his debate with the Caliph al-Mahdī, whose first question concerns how Jesus can be the son of God, but not in the human sense. Timothy responds that it cannot be fully understood as God is a mystery, but likens the birth of the Son from the Father to light being born of the sun, or word being born of the soul. Christ is the Word born of the Father and man born of the Virgin Mary.

The frequency of analogical proofs in Christian works suggests that analogy was, and continued to be, a popular apologetic tool in describing the nature of God. It was used to explain the nature of God to both Christians and non-Christians alike. Moreover it was a tool which those Christians living in the Islamic Empire particularly employed, in an attempt to explain the Trinity in language that their Muslim counterparts might understand, albeit protecting themselves against reproach by repeatedly emphasising the clause that God is ultimately a mystery.

Indeed, these analogies were so well known that Muslims such as Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq and ʻAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad al-Hamadhānī (d.1025) refute them.[402] Unfortunately for Christians who used such analogies extensively, it would appear that their Muslim counterparts neither understood them nor accepted their use in describing God. The fundamental problem for Islamic thinkers, and particularly those who put great emphasis on the utter difference between God and his creation, is that analogy rests on the premise that there is a degree of resemblance between man and God.[403]

Christians clearly recognised this and although always having accepted the imperfection of analogy and the ultimate mystery of God, they appear to lay even greater emphasis on this throughout their works. Unfortunately, the use of analogy, however inferior it was seen to be, still contradicted the Muslim notion that God is

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[402] Thomas, *Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* , 95 and Thomas, *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology,* 274-276

[403] As Albert Nader puts it 'il nous est impossible, selon les muʻtazila, de nous faire une ideé de Dieu, pas même par analogie avec les creatures auxquelles Dieu est tout à fait transcendant.' (According to the Muʻtazila, it is impossible for us to have an idea of God, not even by analogy with creatures, over whom God is completely transcendent.') Nader, *Le système philosophique des Muʻtazila*, 52. Nader also adds that al-Kindī had similar conception in terms of attributes and negative theology, claiming that essentially all we can know of God is that He is one.

completely transcendent, because, taken to the logical extreme, to utter anything about God is essentially analogy, as human language simply cannot describe the majesty of the transcendent God. In reality, however, it must be acknowledged that few Muslims escaped from the use of analogy completely, except maybe the more radical Mu‘tazila, or others such as the rather elusive character of Jahm ibn Ṣafwān (d.745)[404] who, in order to protect God's transcendence, was said to have only seen it as being valid to describe God in terms of what He **does** (eg. 'causes' knowledge, life and power), rather than what He **is** ('knowing', 'living', 'powerful').

The early ninth century *mutakallim* al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm (785-860) stressed that God's only attribute was His 'uncomparability',[405] or His distinction from everything else[406], similarly in order to avoid *tashbīh*, that is to say likening God to temporal things. Strictly speaking, however, even those who made such an effort, like al-

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404 Jahm ibn Safwan is thought to have been the founder of a rival school to the Mu‘tazila, the Jahmiyya, who primarily taught absolute predestination and divine omnipotence, but who agreed with the Mu‘tazila on certain doctrines including the identical nature of the divine attributes with God's essence. See: Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, II, 493-308

405 Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, IV, 438

406 Madelung, Wilferd. 'Al-Qāsim Ibn Ibrāhīm and Christian theology', *Aram* 3 (1991), 38

Qāsim, to protect the transcendence of God, could not fully avoid compromising their position if they were to say anything meaningful about God. For instance, al-Qāsim's proof of the existence of God, like that of ʻAmmār, relies on elements of the created world to tell us something about God's divine nature.[407]

Therefore, when Timothy uses numerous analogies and metaphors in his debate with the Caliph al-Mahdī, al-Mahdī appears to be simply annoyed with them and in most cases ignores them, preferring to ask a more direct or logical question regarding the matter in hand.[408]

Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq appears to dismiss analogies in a similar manner. In his 'Against the Trinity', Abū ʻĪsā responds to a hypothetical Christian, who may claim that the relationship of the hypostases to the substance is like that of limbs to a man or heat

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[407] Abrahamov, B. *Al-Ḳāsim b. Ibrāhīm on the proof of God's existence: kitāb al-dalīl al-kabīr* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1990). Abū Qurra also does this in the *wujūd al-khāliq*, whereby he deduces that the entity or being who is responsible for the creation of the world must be wise and powerful.

[408] Cf. Newman, *Early Christian-Muslim Dialogue*, 178-9, 184-5 In the former reference Timothy notes that al-Maḥdī showed doubt as to the 'possibility of all the above explanations' which involved Timothy giving a number of analogies concerning the relationship of the hypostases to the substance.

and light to fire, with a common sense logical argument designed to show that the two statements (concerning a man and his limbs, for example, and concerning God's substance and hypostases) do not resemble each other. [409] For the most part he ignores analogy and talks very straightforwardly in terms of the logical problem posed by Christian teaching on substance and hypostases; that something can at the same time be identical and dissimilar. The Ash'arite scholar, al-Bāqillānī, writing in the latter part of the tenth century, briefly dismisses a similar analogy concerning the relationship between a person and his hand, or a line of a poem and the poem itself, which he points out refers to parts and wholes, not two wholes, as Christians claim both the substance and each hypostasis to be.[410]

Al-Warrāq also attacks the use of analogy regarding the generation of the Son from the Father, on the grounds that the analogies such as light from the sun and heat from the fire do not resemble God, who is not a composite body like these temporal entities, and who does not undergo change of any kind. This response, emphasising

[409] Thomas, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity",* 94

[410] Thomas, *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology,* 166

God’s transcendence and the futility of temporal comparisons, would have been an easy way to dismiss Christian attempts to explain their conception of the unity of God.

Most likely aware of the staunch opposition to analogy on the part of the Mu‘tazila, all three authors give some indication as to their reason for using of analogy. Abū Qurra does not deal directly with the concept of using analogy to describe God, but does make sure that his analogies are not taken too literally. In both his *Mīmar* and the section pertaining to the divine attributes in the *wujūd al-khāliq*, he is careful to stress the difference and incomparability of the Godhead each time he uses a temporal analogy. Having used the analogy of light, Abū Qurra says:

> The unity of the Divine Being in Father, Son and Holy Spirit is even more pure and more elevated and truer than the light of the lamp, and is not analogous. From every

[thing] there is nothing more refined than Him amongst created beings, not even the most sophisticated among them.'[411]

In the *Burhān*, 'Ammār points out a change in terminology when referring to the divine nature as opposed to temporal analogies. Having given various analogies for the Word and Spirit of God, 'Ammār's hypothetical interlocutor asks why he calls the Word and Spirit of God hypostases, but does not call the light and heat of fire hypostases, 'Ammār replies:

> 'We do that for the perfection of the Creator and his exaltedness above having His Word and Spirit diminished and made imperfect.'[412]

Meanwhile, in his *Masā'il*, he clearly explains what Christians mean when they talk about God using human attributes:

> '…they know that, even if the attributes of created beings may resemble the attributes of the Creator in some of their names, there is no resemblance between them in the

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[411] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 36.11-13. The present author is following Lamoreaux's implied emendation to the text concerning the word '*mukhāriq*' which is read to be *'makhlūq'*.

[412] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 49.3-4

> essence of their original meanings. Additionally, if the attributes of created animals resemble the properties of the substance of the Creator (Great and Exalted) in the name of fatherhood and sonship, then there is no resemblance between them in essence in any way. Rather, if we stretch the mind to the limit of its comprehension, then the contradictions and differences between two different opposite things and the difference between the Fatherhood of the Eternal one and His Sonship, and the fatherhood of created beings and their sonship, then the difference between the two 'fatherhoods' and the two 'sonships' is many many times greater and further apart than the difference between two different opposite things, [to an extent] that cannot even be counted.'[413]

In the *Burhān*, 'Ammār even uses an analogy to clarify the use of analogy and its limitations. He explains that it is like if one were asked to create a model or likeness of a king for someone, which may resemble the king but would not move or see or hear or talk like the king himself does. Likewise:

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[413] ibid., 166.9-17

> '…it is not possible to make a likeness of the Creator from a created being in every respect as there is no resemblance between them, and you will not find in created things anything as perfect as the Creator…'[414]

Abū Rā'iṭa gives repeated and detailed explanations for his use of analogy. In both works, Abū Rā'iṭa makes direct reference to the use of analogy at several points. Before introducing analogical arguments, he points out the need to apply analogy carefully and appropriately whilst bearing in mind that the original thing related to God, for which an analogy is used, is far greater and above the analogy itself[415], and again stresses the only partial similarity of an analogy to the thing it describes after giving various analogies.[416]

At the end of the section in which Abū Rā'iṭa uses analogy in the *Ithbāt*, he tells the reader:

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[414] ibid., 50.21-23

[415] Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth"*, 104

[416] cf. ibid., 108, 184, 194

> ‘This is a part of the confirmation of our teaching on the unity of God and His trinity, (may He be praised) to the extent of what is possible [in terms of] analogy [concerning what is] created, seen and limited, I mean light; Adam, Abel and Eve; and the sun. For the One who brings an analogy into existence, [so that] the ability of the weak created mind can tolerate [it], in order to reach His specific attribute despite [the mind] being far from reaching even a part God’s attributes, praise be to him.[417]

Although their explanation of the use and limited usefulness of analogy in terms of the ultimate transcendence of God can be traced back throughout the Christian tradition, the repeated emphasis on the limits of analogy suggests a keen awareness of the Muslim distaste for it. However, their extensive use of analogies and metaphors to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity, in spite of the likely dismissal of any such argument as compromising the mystery of the divine being, seems to suggest one, or both, of two things. Either Arabic-speaking Christians chose to use this tool due to its deep-rooted tradition in Christian explanation of the Trinity, regardless of the Muslim response to it, or Muslims were not the predominant or sole audience for

[417] Ibid., 114.16-116.3

such treatises. The question of purpose of these works and their audience will be addressed in chapter six.

As mentioned above, despite their often quite obvious dislike of analogy, few Muslims actually fully escaped it. Like their Christian counterparts, Muslims of the period laid out a number of proofs for the existence of God and indications of His nature, whereby logical arguments about the nature of God are made based on what one can infer from witnessing the natural world.

‘Ammār, in particular, can be seen to build such an argument which eventually leads one to the affirmation of the Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Son being the Word of God and the Holy Spirit His Life. In his *Masā'il*, ‘Ammār begins by inferring certain attributes of God from his creation of the world, using a form of design argument which is similar to that of al-Qāsim whose *kitāb al-dalīl al-kabīr* (*The book of the great proof)* is edited by Binyamin Abrahamov. According to Abrahamov, the Mu‘tazila seem to put forward similar arguments to the Christians concerning the

nature of God[418]: he gives al-Jahiz's *kitāb al- 'ibar wa-l-i'tibār* (*The book of advice and admonition*) as an example, saying '[it] aims at proving God's existence and unity through the order of the natural phenomena observed in the universe.'[419]

Essentially, what the Christian use of analogy makes apparent is that Christians and Muslims had two very different approaches to explaining the nature of God. The Christians, following in a long established tradition, clearly felt the use of poetical analogies and metaphor aided their explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Muslims, on the other hand, appear to have been seeking more literal correspondence and arguments based on common sense logic, as the idea of creatures bearing resemblance to God threatened to compromise His transcendence and diminish Him, in their eyes. The Christians took a different view, maintaining that one cannot deny something of God that is affirmed of his creatures, as that would make Him less able or perfect than His creation. Abū Rā'iṭa sums this position up well

[418] Particularly al-Naẓẓām, al-Jāhiz and al-Fuwātī and the Ash'arites. These theologians believed that God's existence is proven by the creation which man could not have created and that the design is the proof of God's knowledge. Abrahamov, B. *Al-Ḳāsim b. Ibrāhīm,* 2-4
[419] Abrahamov. *Al-Ḳāsim b. Ibrāhīm*, 3

when he says: ‘So if this is possible in terms of things created and made, then how does one deny this of the Creator, the Maker…?’[420]

5.2. Scriptural Proofs

Scriptural evidence is perhaps the most natural tool in substantiating a religious teaching or claim, yet when faced with a religion which does not accept the scriptures of another, or rather which accepts them as being divinely revealed but believes that they have been corrupted by those who possess them, the matter becomes quite different. The verb *ḥarrafa* meaning corrupt, alter or distort appears six times in the Qur’an and is mostly an accusation levelled at the Jews[421]. In other verses however, the Christians are clearly linked with the Jews[422] and are accused of ‘forget[ting] a good part of the message that was sent to them’[423]. As ‘People of the Book’, Jews

[420] Keating, Defending the “People of Truth”, 112

[421] Cf. *Qur’an* 2:75, 4:46, 5:13, 5:41

[422] Cf. *Qur’an* 2:113, 5:51

[423] Cf. *Qur’an* 5:14

and Christians are also charged with knowingly concealing the truth.[424] This accusation is one which seems to have increasingly shaped Christian apologetic in Arabic, as Muslim authors began to demand arguments based on reason as opposed to scripture.[425]

In general, it appears that Muslim theologians of the period were familiar with the Bible as well as Christian history and teachings, but chose particularly to focus on doctrines which directly contradicted Islamic thought, namely the Trinity and the Incarnation. According to Thomas: '…theologians in the third/ninth century appear almost to have ignored Christian scripture altogether.'[426] Certainly in relation to the doctrine of the Trinity scriptural evidence appears to have been largely disregarded; Muslim scholars concentrated on showing the illogicality of the doctrine based on logical and rational proofs.

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[424] Cf. *Qur'an* 3:146, 3:71

[425] An example of this can be found in one of Abū Qurra's short Greek works whereby a 'Saracen' tells Abū Qurra, 'Prove this to me, not from your Isaiah or your Matthew, whom I don't much care for, but from notions that are necessary, shared and universally acknowledged.' Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurra*, 221

[426] 'The Bible and the Kalām' in D. Thomas (ed.) *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2007), 179

Meanwhile, testimony collections, that is collections of biblical passages relating to a certain theme or doctrine, had a long tradition in Christian writing and, as Griffith points out, '…in pre-Islamic times arguments from scripture had always been a standard part of theological discourse.'[427]

One is tempted, therefore to regard the early ninth century as a period of transition or overlap, in which one finds examples of apologetic works containing very traditional biblical testimonia collections such as the anonymous Melkite apology known as *On the triune Nature* from around the mid-eighth century,[428] and those which begin to rely less on scriptural evidence and more on reason-based arguments. Indeed, Samir traces the development in Christian works in Arabic by categorising works under the following headings: 'Biblical and homiletical approach', 'Mixed biblical and philosophical approach', 'Very philosophical approach', and

[427] Griffith, S. 'Arguing from scripture: the Bible in the Christian/Muslim encounter in the middle ages, in Thomas J. Hefernan and Thomas E. Burman (eds), *Scripture and pluralism: reading the Bible in the religiously plural worlds of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Leiden: Boston: Brill, 2005), 35
[428] Gibson, *On the triune nature*

‘Spiritual humanistic approach’. The first phase, according to Samir, is represented by those such as the author of on the Triune nature, the second by ‘Abū Rā’iṭa and ‘Ammār among others, the third by Yaḥyā ibn ‘adī (893-974) and the final phase by the likes of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa‘ (905-987) and Elias of Nisibis (975-1043). [429] What is perhaps noteworthy in terms of the authors studied here, is that Abū Qurra is placed in the first phase, whereas his two younger contemporaries are placed in the second.

There have been a number of studies undertaken specifically on scriptural proofs in the works of our three Christian authors and others, many in reference to the translation of the Bible into Arabic,[430] as well as the selection and use of certain

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[429] Samir, Samir Khalil ‘“The Earliest Arab Apology for Christianity (c. 750)’ in S.K. Samir and J.S. Nielsen, (eds) *Christian Arabic Apologetics during the Abbasid Period (750-1258)* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994), 57-114

[430] See for example: Griffith, S. "The Gospel in Arabic: an inquiry into its appearance in the first Abbasid century", *Oriens Christianus* 69, (1985), 126-67; and Kachouh, H. ‘The Arabic versions of the gospels: a case study of John 1:1 and 1:18’ in D. Thomas (ed.), *The Bible in Arab Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2007)

passages as proof texts in both the Christian and Islamic context.[431] The aim of this section is to ascertain how biblical proofs fit into the Trinitarian treatises of Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, that is to say how and where they are used, particularly in relation to the apologetic aspect of these works and their engagement with Muslim thinking.

All three authors use a variety of biblical quotations to show that God has referred to Himself either in the third person or in the plural, thus indicating his Trinitarian nature. As seen in Chapter Two, Abū Qurra gives a long list of instances where God appears to refer to Himself or is referred to more than once, though He is only one God.[432] In some instances, we are told, God is referring to his eternal Son:

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[431] See for example: Swanson, M. 'Apologetics, catechesis, and the question of audience in "On the Triune Nature of God" (Sinai Arabic 154) and three treatises of Theodore Abu Qurrah', in Tamcke, M. (ed) *Christians and Muslims in dialogue in the Islamic Orient of the middle ages* (Beirut: Ergon Verlag Wurzburg, 2007); and ________. 'Beyond Prooftexting(2): The use of the Bible in some early Arabic Christian apologies', D. Thomas (ed.) *The Bible in Arab Christianity*; Keating, S. 'The use and translation of Scripture in the apologetic writings of Abū Rāʾiṭa l-Takrītī', in D. Thomas (ed.), *The Bible in Arab Christianity*

[432] Cf. Chapter 2, 106

> 'Your throne, Oh God, is forever and ever. Your righteous scepter is a scepter of Your dominion: you love righteousness and hate injustice. Therefore, God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of joy more than your companions.' (Ps 45:6-7)[433]

The apparent reference to two gods, the one addressed in the opening line and the one anointed Him. Abū Qurra tells us, is actually a reference to the Son and the Father, who are both eternal and only one God. This type of references seems to represent a somewhat creative interpretation of biblical passages, in order to support the concept of a Trinitarian God. 'Ammār, as seen in Chapter Four,[434] quotes the beginning of the Shema and the use of the word 'God' or 'Lord' three times, to come to the same conclusion.

Abū Rā'iṭa does something similar of the story found in Genesis 18:1-3 whereby God appeared to Abraham in the form of three men standing before him, to whom he said

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[433] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 29.5-7

[434] Cf. Chapter 4, 264

‘Lord, if you regard me with merciful eye, then do not pass by your servant.’[435] . The three men Abraham saw represent the three hypostases of the godhead and his addressing of them as a single ‘Lord’, signifies that God is one. Abū Rā’iṭa repeats this story in both his *Ithbāt* and his *al-Risāla al-ūlā*. In the latter, Abū Rā’iṭa also points to another biblical indication of the three hypostases in Isaiah 6:3 when the angels said ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord’, repeating the word ‘holy’ three times.

Abū Rā’iṭa, in his *al-Risāla al-ūlā* and his *Ithbāt*, and ‘Ammār, in his *Masā’il*, both open their sections on biblical proofs with the use of what we have previously termed the ‘plural argument’, that is to say that God often refers to Himself in the first person plural. Both authors give almost identical examples including Genesis 1:26,[436] Genesis 11:7,[437] and Daniel 4:31, ‘We speak to you, O Bukhtanaṣir!’[438] Their

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[435] Dakkash, *Abū Rā’iṭa al-Takrītī,* 94.12-13

[436] ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness’.

[437] English Standard Version. Abū Rā’iṭa’s version is the same as this and identical in both his works except he uses the verb farraqa (to divide) Keating 116.15-118.1 and 202.1; Dakkash, 92.1. ‘Ammār uses *halammū* instead of *ta‘ālū* for ‘Come!’ and the verb *qasama* instead of *farraqa*.(*Masā’il*)160.6

[438] This how both Abū Rā’iṭa (*al-risālā al-ūlā*) and ‘Ammār phrase it, except that the name is spelt Bukhtanassir in the latter’s version. Most English bibles tend to name the individual in question Nebuchadnazzar and use a passive construction ‘to thee it is spoken’, thus avoiding the need for an

argument is that in such passages God is pointing to the Trinitarian nature of his being, an argument which can also be found in *On the triune nature*. However, both expand upon this argument in different ways: Abū Rā'iṭa by pointing out similar occurrences in the Qur'an, whilst 'Ammār goes into a little more detail concerning Genesis 1:26, pointing out the use of the plural possessive pronoun ('our') with a singular noun ('image'; likeness) to indicate both 'threeness' and oneness. Having put forward their respective arguments, both authors then deal with Muslim objection concerning the first person plural as a 'plural of majesty'.[439]

Abū Qurra does not employ this argument, but says something similar as part of a long response in his *Mīmār* to the question of whether it was three or one who created the world. The objection is that if the Christians say three, then they are implying that there are three gods, and if they say one, then the other two hypostases are unnecessary. Abū Qurra responds with a number of analogies, as discussed in

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active subject 'We' or 'I'. Whether Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār are taking their reference from a common version of the Bible or possibly from a common list of proof texts for this argument which have been developed and potentially moulded to support the plural argument, merits further investigation.

[439] Cf. Chapter 3, 186 and Chapter 4, 261ff.

the previous section, which ultimately show how one can say ‘the Father created the world’ or ‘the Son created the world’ or ‘the Holy Spirit created (sg. *khalaqa*) the world’, but not that ‘the Father and the Son and the Spirit created (pl. *khalaqū*) the world’. In a similar way, the Church, Abū Qurra tells us, says ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit have mercy (sg. *arḥamnī*) on me’, but not ‘Father, Son and Holy Spirit have mercy (pl. *arḥamūnī*) on me’.

Other more direct references supporting the notion of God as Trinity are also employed by the three authors. One which all three perhaps unsurprisingly quote is the baptismal formula found in Matthew 28:19, ‘Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.'[440] In the case of Abū Qurra’s *Mīmar* and Abū Rā’iṭa’s *Ithbāt,* this is found towards the end of each of their sections concerning biblical proofs[441] and seems to be a way to almost conclude the section. ‘Ammār uses the reference in answer to the

[440] English Standard Version

[441] In Abū Qurra cf. Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 32. In Abū Rā’ita cf. Keating, *Defending the “people of truth”*, 118. In ‘Ammār cf. Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 164

fifth question of the section on the Trinity in the *Masā'il* concerning why the three hypostases are named Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The third type of biblical reference used by Arabic-speaking Christian authors is a range of references which speak of God's Word and Spirit. As such, John 1:1 features in all three authors' writings.[442] Abū Qurra and 'Ammār, in both of his works, quote Job 33:4 and Abū Rā'iṭa, and 'Ammār both make reference to Psalm 33:6[443], Psalm 119:89.[444]

As has been established, all three of the Christian authors examined in this study use biblical proofs to aid or support their clarification of the doctrine of the Trinity. Their use is similar in that most often the three authors choose similar quotations which point to the Trinitarian nature of God as both one and three simultaneously, as seen above. The emphasis placed on scriptural evidence, however, in terms of the extent

442 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.' (English Standard Version)

443 'By the Word of God the heavens were created and by the Spirit in Him all of their forces (*quwātiha*)' Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa,* 95.3-4.

444 'Forever O Lord, your word, is firmly fixed in the heavens' (English Standard Version)

to which each author uses such references and their placement of them within their respective works, does vary.

In *al-risālat al-ūlā*, it is significant that Abū Rā'iṭa does not introduce biblical proofs until roughly the final quarter of his treatise. Up until this point, his arguments are based on logical and rational grounds, in order to show how something can be said to be both one and three, and thus lead his reader to the rational acceptance of God as one *ousia* and three hypostases. Biblical proofs are then introduced afterwards, possibly as a means of adding to or strengthening his previous arguments, or simply for the Christian element of his audience.

This approach would suggest that Abū Rā'iṭa was acutely aware that the Muslim element of his audience would not accept biblical proofs, which they claimed had been corrupted in the hands of the Jews and the Christians. Indeed, Abū Rā'iṭa dedicates a short section towards the end of *al-Risāla al-ūlā* to the accusation of *taḥrīf*, in which he responds to the two possible claims of the Muslims that either the

Christians themselves have altered the biblical passages, or that the Jews have altered them and deceived the Christians in doing so.

To the first claim Abū Rā'iṭa replies that the Christians cannot have corrupted their own scriptures, as their adversaries the Jews have the same scriptures in their possession which do not differ from what the Christians have. If it suggested that the Jews have corrupted the texts in order to deceive the Christians, then Abū Rā'iṭa argues that there must then be original copies of genuine scripture in Jewish hands, as the Jews themselves would not wish to stray from God's path.

Sandra Keating argues that Abū Rā'iṭa's whole apologetic enterprise is dominated by the accusation of *taḥrīf,* a position which is based on the apparent use of 'uncontroversial' New Testament proofs and a marked preference for Old Testament proofs which are shared by both Jews and Christians and therefore cannot have been altered.[445] Whether there is enough evidence to draw such a conclusion is

[445] Keating, 'The use and translation of scripture', 258-274.

debatable. In any case, Abū Rā'iṭa is clearly aware of the Muslim rejection of Christian scriptures, and so is careful not to make biblical evidence the cornerstone of his argument.

Abū Qurra, by contrast, does not appear to be as concerned by the accusation of *taḥrīf,* as his whole argument for the doctrine of the Trinity is firmly rooted in his wider argument that Christianity can be shown to be the 'true religion' by rational criteria, and therefore Christian scriptures should be accepted on that basis. As a result, it would appear, and in contrast to his contemporaries, Abū Qurra places scriptural evidence first after his introduction to the treatise, followed by rational proofs. He continues to use biblical proofs freely throughout the treatise, although he adds some rational arguments for those who may not accept Christian scriptures. His subordination of rational proofs for the Trinity to biblical evidence, despite his potential Muslim readership is something which sets him apart from his two contemporaries.

In terms of selection of references, Abū Qurra's main concern appears to be defending the truth of what is said in the Bible. As such, almost all the biblical quotations he uses are to show how apparent contradictions are not contradictions and that God is shown to have more than one aspect but not be counted as more than one God.

‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s organisation of his material is more like Abū Rā’iṭa than Abū Qurra, in that the biblical proofs he gives in both of his treatises play a secondary role to his reason based arguments. In the fifth chapter of his *Burhān*, biblical references are only used to illustrate the fact that God has Word and Spirit, which forms the basis of his entire argument: that God must logically be articulating and living and therefore have Word and Life, which are equated with the Son and Holy Spirit. He uses similar quotations in the *Masā’il,* as well as Matthew 28:19 to explaining why the three hypostases should be called Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and the references which form the ‘plural argument’ which he and Abū Rā’iṭa both put forward.

Like Abu Rā'iṭa, 'Ammār does mention the accusation of *taḥrīf*, but only very briefly in his sections concerning the Trinity, just before introducing the plural argument[446]. This, however, is most likely due to the fact that in the *Burhān*, his entire preceding chapter is dedicated to the question of *taḥrīf* and so it would be fair to assume that he is aware of Muslim responses to proofs based on Christian scripture, and addresses the subject accordingly.

Knowing, from both Muslim and Christian works of the period, that biblical proofs tended to be largely dismissed as corrupted, it is natural to consider the significance of scriptural proofs in Arabic explanations of the Trinity. Most modern scholars suggest that the primary audience for these works were Christian, and such traditional proofs were designed to strengthen their faith alongside rational arguments, but also had another purpose of providing a defence against Muslims, whether directly or indirectly, that is to say by equipping Christians with tools to counteract Muslim arguments. Keating suggests that this secondary purpose

[446] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 159.22-160.3

can be detected through the careful selection and use of biblical texts, specifically to engage with Muslim objections.[447]

Like Samir, Swanson, who treats Abū Qurra's biblical proofs alongside those found in *On the triune nature*, would appear to place Abū Qurra in this first phase of apologetic and, on the basis the centrality accorded to scriptural evidence, this conclusion seems fair. The differences between the three authors should not be over exaggerated, however: the biblical proofs they employ do not vary hugely in terms of actual content, that is to say which proofs are selected to explain or defend the doctrine of the Trinity, many of which would have been traditional proof texts for the doctrine which predated Islam. Where there is a subtle difference, is in the volume of biblical references and the priority or lack of priority they are given in each of the author's treatises.

[447] Keating, 'The use and translation of scripture' in D. Thomas (ed.) *The Bible in Arab Christianity*

Biblical proofs, it would seem, although somewhat tailored for a Muslim audience, actually represent part of a well-established Christian tradition which indicates the Trinitarian nature of God. As such, they found a place in Christian Arabic writings, and presumably would have been useful and significant for the Christian element of their readership. The accusation of corruption certainly appears to have had an effect on the works of our three authors, particularly Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, who place much less emphasis on the biblical proofs they provide by using them sparingly and placing them after their reason based arguments. Even Abū Qurra, who insists repeatedly that the Bible should be accepted as a logical result of the proof of Christianity as the true religion, also recognises that rational proofs are required to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity.

5.3. Terminology

The question of language, although not the main focus of this study, nevertheless forms a strong undercurrent to the questions of place, purpose and significance of

early Christian Arabic texts. The explanation of Christian doctrine in Arabic, a language whose theological vocabulary came to be co-opted by Islam, and one which did not have the words to express many of the abstract concepts found in Greek philosophical and subsequently Christian theological thinking, would undoubtedly have been a daunting task. The translation movement of the early ‘Abbasid period meant that the challenge of rendering the sense of Greek terms, via Syriac, into Arabic began to be faced head on. It also meant, however, that the period during which Abū Qurra and his contemporaries were writing was a period of transition; of varying influences, with translators and scholars of different specialisations and preoccupations looking to translate difficult concepts, conceived in different intellectual frameworks, from one language to another. The fact that the language they were trying to find was to talk about God, considering Neoplatonic influences on both Christianity and Islam, added to the problem significantly.

A number of modern scholars have dealt with aspects of terminology in Christian Arabic texts concerning the Trinity. Rachid Haddad, in addition to discussing

Trinitarian analogies, also investigated the use of terminology relating to the Trinity, which he usefully placed into a table showing which terms are used by which authors.[448] His study includes Abū Qurra and Abū Rā'iṭa, but not 'Ammār. Other scholars have looked at isolated terms as used by individual authors; Sidney Griffith's seminal paper on the use of the term '*uqnūm*' in 'Ammār's writings and Harold Suermann's examination of Abū Rā'iṭa's use of the term '*ṣifa*' come to mind here.[449] In this section we will examine various terms relating to the nature and unity of God which are used by the three Christian authors at the centre of this study.

Terminology relating to the Trinity falls broadly into two categories: terms relating to the *ousia* of God and terms relating to His hypostases. As seen from Part One of this study, all three authors clearly seek to clarify the traditional Christian expression of the Godhead as one ousia and three hypostases, in Arabic. There are, however, variations in the terminology they use to achieve this. The main terms used relating to God's ousia are *jawhar*, *ṭabī'a*, *dhāt* and *māhiya*. Those denoting His hypostases

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[448] Haddad, *La Trinité divine,* 182-183

[449] Griffith, 'The concept of al-uqnūm; Suermann, 'Der Begriff Ṣifah bei Abū Rā'iṭa'.

include *uqnūm* or *qunūm*, *shakhṣ*, *wajh* and *khaṣṣa*, as well as a few other less frequently used terms. The word *'ayn* appears to refer to both God's ousia and hypostases in different places.

In Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, the word *jawhar* is the most common translation of *ousia*. A word of Persian origin from the root '*johr*', the term already had the sense of 'substance' in Middle Persian,[450] but also developed connotations of 'jewel' or 'precious stone' in Arabic at a certain point. In Mu'tazilī circles the term came to refer to a single atom or a conglomeration of atoms or substance as part of the substance-accident duo which formed the basis of Atomistic thinking.[451] The term *jawhar*, whether it meant atom or substance, was linked to the temporal categories of accidents (*'arāḍ*) and bodies (*ajsām*), and as such, had nothing directly to do with

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450 Afnan, S. *Philosophical terminology in Arabic and Persian* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964), 99

451 Ibn Mattawayh (d. early eleventh century), pupil of the famous Mu'tazilite 'Abd al-Jabbār, gives his definition of *jawhar* (meaning 'atom') as that of something which occupies space and is characterised by an attribute through which it either: forms a larger unit with other atoms, fills a portion of space, measures space by occupying it, or prevents another atom from being in that space. Dhanani, A. *The physical theory of Kalām: Atoms, space and void in Basrian Mu'tazilī Cosmology,* (London; New York; Köln, 1994), 61

God.[452] In al-Ash'arī's *Maqālāt* one also often finds the use of the plural *jawāhir* instead of *ajsām* (bodies).[453] As such, the connotations of the term in both its singular and plural form were very much linked to an atomistic view of the world.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, as van Ess puts it: 'Der islamische Atomismus ist kein Materialismus.[454] The Mu'tazila, although they opted for atomistic thinking in order to describe the world around them, were deeply religious men who placed God at the centre of everything, and, as such, their scientific thinking could never be fully divorced from their theological thinking. Their partiality towards atomistic thinking was more of an attempt to trace created reality back to a single kind of substance,[455] but within a system that was undoubtedly linked to God, the 'Creator of all things'.[456]

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[452] Abū al-Hudhayl refers to the atom as *al-juz' al-wāḥid* more often than *jawhar*, and in his thinking there are six atoms which make up a body. The simple substance does not inhere accidents, Al-Ash'arī, *Maqālāt* 311.11 ff and Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, V, 367-457

[453] Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, II, 39

[454] Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, IV, 479 'Islamic Atomism is no Materialism'

[455] ibid.

[456] Qur'an 6:102, 13:16, 39:62 etc.

It is also worth noting that the term *jawhar* did exist in a philosophical sense. As Ess points out, the Caliph al-Walīd II (r. 743-44) referred to the 'substance of wine' in the Aristotelian sense.[457] Moreover, the philosophers of the early ninth century, men such as Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī, would also have been acquainted with the Aristotelian sense of the term.[458] Certainly, by the tenth century, Muslim scholars were aware of the Christian sense of the term. Al-Ash'arī, in a section in his Maqālāt concerning substance and accidents, acknowledges that the Christians consider substance to be something which:

> 'subsists in itself and so each self-subsistent [thing] is a *jawhar* and each *jawhar* subsists in itself.'[459]

The question remains, however, that if the Mu'tazila were the main school to engage in theological debate with Christians in this period, as would appear to be the case,

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[457] Ess*, Theologie und Gesellschaft*, IV, 465

[458] In his refutation of the Trinity preserved by Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī, al-Kindī spends time discussing terms such as the Aristotelian categories in detail, and yet makes no comment on the term *jawhar*, except to use it in describing what the Christians teach. Périer, A. 'Un traité de Yaḥyā ben 'Adī'.

[459] al-Ash'ari, *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*, 306

then why would Christians use a term so loaded with material and temporal connotations to describe the very being of God?

Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār use the term throughout their works relating to the Trinity, often placing it either in relation to God's hypostases or in close proximity to synonyms denoting God's being or essence. 'Ammār gives the most direct explanation of *jawhar* when speaking of the ancient leaders of the Christian community, who, he tells the reader:

> '…could not find in perceivable things anything more perfect in its essence (*dhāt*) or higher in its quiddity (*māhiya*) or as self-sufficient from needing others or substantial (*qiwām*) in its essence than the substance (*jawhar*), so for that reason they called Him a substance.'[460]

Meanwhile, in his work on the Trinity, Abū Qurra employs the term *jawhar* only once when referring to the 'refinement of the divine substance' in terms of its relation to the hypostases, as opposed to temporal analogies such as the sun and its rays. He also

[460] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī,* 162.20-163.2

uses the more abstract form *jawhariyya* twice, but each time in reference to the substantial nature of an analogous example. When he refers to the divine being or substance, Abū Qurra prefers the term *ṭabīʿa* (nature), although when he first introduces the subject of his treatise concerning the Trinity, Abū Qurra does not use a term describing God's being at all, instead referring to the Godhead simply as 'three hypostases and one God'[461]. Abū Qurra also uses *ṭabīʿa* to talk about the 'natures' of beings as opposed their individual 'persons' in employing Aristotle's unity of species as an argument to show that something can be said to be one and more than one simultaneously.

Ṭabīʿa is not used by Abū Rā'iṭa with reference to God's nature, but he does use the term in connection with the Incarnation and the divine and human natures of Christ. 'Ammār uses *ṭabīʿa* relating to God's nature on a few occasions, where he places it

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[461] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 27. Interestingly, the anonymous Melkite author *On the triune nature*, does not use any terms for the being of God, nor does he talk about God's hypostases. Instead he prefers to say that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one God or, more often, that God and His Word and Spirit are one god. Cf. Gibson, *On the triune nature*, 74.1, 74.21-75.2, .75.22, 78.3-4

after a phrase including the word *jawhar*, which makes *ṭabīʿa* appear to be a loose synonym of ‘substance’ or *ousia*. To give a few examples, in his *Masāʾil*, ‘Ammār refers to God as ‘one in substance (*jawhar*), unique in nature (*ṭabīʿa*)’[462]; ‘one in essence (*dhāt*), unique in nature and eternity’[463], and refers to life and speech as being the ‘quiddity of the essence and the nature’[464]. He also uses the term twice in the *Burhān*, again referring to life and speech being of the ‘essence of the nature’.[465] Such usages would support the idea that, to an extent, *jawhar*, *ṭabīʿa* and *dhāt* were largely interchangeable, in as much as they referred to the ‘being’ or ‘essence’ of God.

According to Rachid Haddad, some theologians appear to distinguish between the divine nature, as in God, and the nature of Christ before his Incarnation, preferring *jawhar* for the former and *ṭabīʿa* for the latter. In terms of preferring *jawhar* to refer to the nature of God, this would certainly seem to fit for Abū Rāʾiṭa and ‘Ammār.

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[462] Hayek, *ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī,* 153.2

[463] Ibid., 149

[464] ibid., 157

[465] ibid., 55

As seen from the few brief examples thus far, the term *dhāt* appears frequently in close proximity to *jawhar* and *ṭabī'a* in the Arabic Christian works examined here. For Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, it seems to be a general, all-encompassing term for the 'being' or 'essence' of God. In his *Ithbāt*, Abū Rā'iṭa makes the statement that God's *dhāt* is described by His existence as living and speaking'[466], whilst 'Ammār tells his reader towards the end of the third section of his *Masā'il*: 'it is proper to say that the divine substance (*al-jawhar al-ilāhī*) is existent, living [and] speaking…'[467]

Abū Rā'iṭa refers to each of God's hypostases as a 'property (*khaṣṣa*) of His essence' and also refers to the 'essence of a hypostasis'[468], whilst speaking of Eve and Abel as 'two perfect essences from a perfect essence.'[469]

In the *Burhān*, 'Ammār uses forms of the word *dhāt* repeatedly at the beginning of the chapter when asking his hypothetical (Muslim) interlocutor about God being living

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[466] Keating, *Defending the "People of truth"*, 112.17

[467] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī,* 177.7

[468] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī,* 98.169.3

[469] ibid., 101.178.3

and speaking, before introducing the presumably more specific term *jawhar*. In his Masā'il, 'Ammār gives an insight into the relationship between substance and essence:

> 'Because the reason for which this essence was named a substance is because God willed this with the necessity of His existence and the proof/constancy of His quiddity…'[470]

Dhāt would appear to mean 'actuality' or 'being' in a more general sense whilst *jawhar* seems to mean 'being' or 'substance' in a more technical sense. As seen from the examples above, however, the difference in meaning appears to be a subtle one.

In Abū Qurra's main writing on the Trinity, the term *dhāt* appears only once in the phrase, '…[John and Paul] denied… that change was to be found in the essence of

[470] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī,* 173.11-13

each of its hypostases'[471] though Lamoureaux translates it as '[John and Paul] denied…that change was to be found with regard to each of its hypostases', and so it could be argued that he does not use the term at all in his works pertaining to the Trinity.

The tenth century Christian scholars, Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa and Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī, are said to have considered *ṭabī'a*, *dhāt* and *jawhar* as synonyms in their usage.[472] In Muslim circles one does find *dhāt* used in relation to God, although it is not a Qur'anic word. The gradual categorisation of the divine attributes into attributes of essence (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*) and attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-f'il*) is testament to this. However, van Ess makes the suggestion that some of the early Mu'tazila, including Abū al-Hudhayl and al-Naẓẓām, may not have used the term *dhāt*[473] as they do not appear to distinguish between two types of attribute. As established in chapter one of the present study, for Abū al-Hudhayl, God is knowing, living and so on through 'a

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[471] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara,* 40.8-9 ('*bi-tasmītihā…an tūjid al-ghayriyya fī dhāt kul uqnūm minhā'*)
[472] Haddad, *La trinité divine*, 162-3
[473] Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, III, 278

knowledge that is He', whilst al-Naẓẓām holds that He is knowing and living through His eternity. A certain Farrazādī claims that Abū al-Hudhayl said that God is knowing through an act of knowledge which is identical to Him and the rest of Mu'tazila interpreted it as through Himself or His essence using the phrase *bi-dhātihi*.[474] According, to Abrahamov, al-Qāsim did not distinguish between attributes of essence or action either.[475]

In an appendix to his book entitled *Philosophical terminology in Arabic and Persian*,[476] Soheil Afnan also groups the term *'ayn* with *jawhar* and dhāt, as 'their Greek equivalents have become confused.'[477] The Persian translator, Ibn al-Muqaffa'(d. 756) rendered the Aristotelian category of substance (*ousia*) into Arabic as *'ayn*, although he also used *jawhar* and *jawāhīr* for the primary and secondary substances mentioned in both the *Metaphysics* and *Categories* and even uses the

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[474] Ibid., V, 367ff . Ess gives the reference of this author as follows: Farrazāzdī, Ta'līq sharḥ al-Uṣūl ak-khamsa, in Abū Rashīd al Naisābūrī, Sa'īd ibn Muḥammad(?) fī al-tawḥīd, (Muḥammad 'Abdalhādī Abū Rīda (Cairo, 1969), 573

[475] Abrahamov, B. *Al-Ḳāsim b. Ibrāhīm*

[476]Afnan, *Philosophical terminology*.

[477] Ibid., 99

abstract form '*jawhariyya*' in his translation of the *Metaphysics*. *'Ayn* is also given as the translation of '*to hoto'* in many cases, as is *dhāt* .[478]

Māhiya, meaning 'quiddity' or 'essential nature', is another term which sometimes appears in Christian Arabic texts on the Trinity, often in close proximity to *jawhar*, *ṭabī'a*, and *dhāt.* It appears that the use of the suffix 'iyya' was introduced early on by Christian translators attempting to convey abstract philosophical notions.[479] Abū Rā'iṭa uses the term four times in his *Ithbāt* and once in *Al-risāla al-ula*. In each instance in the former treatise he refers to the 'substance and quiddity' of the

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[478] The term 'ayn is a tricky term to define. Michel Hayek, in his glossary to 'Ammār's writings, translates the word simply as 'identity'. It seems more likely, however, that the term means different things in different places. In some places it appears to be equivalent to *nafs* meaning 'self' and in other places 'source' would appear to be the most fitting term. According to Edward Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* the "*ayn'* of something is synonymous with its *nafs* and its *dhāt* 'which means the same' and its *shakhṣ*[478] 'which means nearly, or rather exactly', the same as its *dhāt* '….and the material substance of a thing' and its *aṣl* 'as meaning its essence or constituent substance'. See: Lane, Edward. *Arabic-English Lexicon*. On the basis of this, it would seem entirely plausible that the word might have been used to mean different things in different places and/or rather generically as having to do with the essence of God. Interestingly, the term is nowhere to be found in 'Ammār's later writing on the Trinity in the *kitāb al-burhān*. This might suggest that either it was confusing for the reader or that 'Ammār abandoned it as he later refined his terminology, possibly following a Muslim response to his work.

[479] As such one also frequently finds the terms '*jawhariyya*', *dhātiyya* and *uqnūmiyya* in Christian Arabic works of the period. For instances in the three authors studied here see Appendix 1.

hypostases[480] and in the latter he speaks of ‘their quiddity and their existence’[481]. Similarly, the term is found in ‘Ammār’s *Masā’il*. ‘Ammār explains that life and speech are characteristics ‘from the structure of the substance and quiddity of the essence and nature’[482] and also speaks of the ‘quiddity of the substance and essence of the nature’[483]. Like Abū Rā’iṭa, ‘Ammār refers to the quiddity of individual hypostases. Both use ‘quiddity’ in reference to God and created beings as an analogy for the divine nature. Like *dhāt*, it would seem that *māhiya* was used as a fairly generic synonym for the very being or essence of God.

In Islamic thought, it would appear that, at one time at least, *māhiya* was a term that could be used in relation to God. Abū Ḥanīfa (699-767) claimed that God has a *māhiya*, a sort of individual reality which man could not recognise on earth, but would be able to in the afterlife.[484] Van Ess tells us that Ḍirār b. ‘Amr (c.728-815) and al-

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480 Cf. Keating, *Defending the "People of truth"*, 102, 106, 108, 114. The usage on p.106 is in reference to the analogy of lights in a house.

481 Dakkash, *Abū Rā’iṭa al-Takrītī,* 89

482 Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī,* 157.11-12

483 ibid. 157.12-13

484 Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, I, 211

Najjār (d.c.835) were the last to use the word in terms of *kalām* as it became felt that man was not in a position to recognise God's *māhiya*[485], al-Qāsim ibn Ibrāhīm seems to have replaced the term *māhiya* with *dhāt*.[486] Once half of the 'alte Gegensatzpaar'[487] opposite *anniya* ('existence' or 'being'), *māhiya* seems to have transformed, from being a more abstract word signifying the opposite of 'existence', into a synonym of *anniya*, having the connotation of 'individuelle Wirklichkeit'[488], which is why it was gradually abandoned by those concerned with the strict transcendence of God. For the Mu'tazila, God appears to have a *māhiya* which humans are not able to recognise.

What have become known as the Aristotelian categories appear in two almost identical lists of ten such categories or predications; one in Book One of his *Topics*[489]

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485 ibid., IV, 425

486 ibid. al-Qasim appears to have been particularly strict in terms of stressing the transcendence of God, only recognising one attribute: the incomparability of God.

487 ibid., 438 'opposing pair'- i.e. the two terms had opposite meanings.

488 ibid. 'individual reality'

489 Pickard-Cambridge, W.A. 'Aristotle: Topics Book I', available from: http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/topics.1.i.html; accessed 8/3/11

and the other in Chapter Four of the *Categories*[490]. The only difference between the two lists is that one begins with the term *'ti esti'*, the equivalent of '*māhiya*' in Arabic, and the other begins with '*ousia*' (*jawhar*). Both terms can be found in Christian works of the early ninth century, although *jawhar* is clearly the preferred term. In Aristotle it is likely that they signified different things.[491] In translation into Arabic, (and perhaps before that into Syriac) it seems, the two terms both become something which referred to the very being or essential nature of God.

As one might appreciate from this brief survey so far, there are quite a number of terms used to convey the sense of God as one *ousia* and three hypostases. Whilst there is not enough evidence to draw definitive conclusions, what the seemingly haphazard use of terminology by these three authors might suggest is that, faced with the challenge of expressing their beliefs in Arabic, the Christian theologians of

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490 Ackrill, J.L. (trans.) 'Aristotle's Categories' (Chapters 1-5), available from: http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/520/Cats1-5.pdf; accessed on 8/3/11

491 Robin Smith notes that in Aristotle, *ousia* is likely to be an entity and *ti-esti* a predication, a 'what-it-is' which can apply to a number of the other categories. See: Smith, R. 'Aristotle's Logic', Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, available from: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/aristotle-logic/#Def; accessed 01/03/11, sect. 7.3

the early ninth century were trying to find the best way to describe the nature of God in a language where precise technical terms were not readily available.

This theory would explain their use of a number of synonyms, many of which are also found in other Christian works of the period.[492] Most of the terms they use in their works would have come from mainly Christian translations of works by Aristotle and the Greek Fathers. To denote *ousia*, Abū Qurra preferred the term *ṭabī'a,* whilst his Syriac-speaking counterparts favoured the originally Persian word '*jawhar*'. Although *jawhar* had very concrete connotations amongst the Mu'tazila, it did have a philosophical sense which was used by Muslims like al-Kindī and which was certainly understood by Ash'arite *mutakallimūn* of later generations such as al-Bāqillānī. Perhaps realising the difficulty of trying to persuade Muslims of the truth and viability of the doctrine of the Trinity, our Christian authors also employed a number of synonymous terms such as *dhāt*, *māhiyya* and *'ayn*, presumably in order to be as clear as possible, or at least in the hope of finding something that will be acceptable

[492] Cf. Haddad, *La Trinité divine* , 161-185

to their Muslim audience. As pointed out here, they all appear to have slightly different preferences, although their use of terminology does not appear to be significantly different from one another in general terms.

With the hypostases, it appears that the transliterated Syriac term '*uqnūm*' was preferred by all three authors as no suitable Arabic word existed. However, *uqnūm*, being a loan word, would require some explanation, which lead Abū Qurra to also use *wajh*, Abū Rā'iṭa to choose *shakhṣ* (which appears to be the most common equivalent substitute of *uqnūm*) and 'Ammār to firmly oppose the use of *shakhṣ* according to its concrete connotations, preferring to use *uqnūm* instead,[493] with *khaṣṣa* (property) and *ma'na* (entity) as more vague synonyms. The other two authors also employ the term *khaṣṣa*, which they seem to find useful as an introductory concept to *uqnūm*, but one which cannot be equated with *uqnūm* directly as it must be a property of something else, and therefore cannot stand alone as a hypostasis can.

[493] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 162.1-3

It is perhaps curious that Christians like ‘Ammār would avoid *shakhṣ* due to its bodily connotations and yet would persist with the use of a term like *jawhar* which would clearly have been unacceptable to the most dominant Muslim theological school of the time. Haddad tests the theory that Christians were attempting to circulate a new philosophical lexicon. His conclusion is that Arabic speaking Christians recognised that there was no suitable terminology to explain Christian theology and so attempted to make the best situation of what was available to them, trying to focus on getting the sense and meaning of their doctrines across without dwelling too much on particular terminology. Haddad feels that ultimately:

> ‘Malgré un effort sérieux d’adaptation au langage, les théologiens ont maintenu la priorité aux dogmes de la foi… L’élaboration du vocabulaire trinitaire par les chrétiens arabes, souvent polyglottes, ne semble pas avoir subi l’influence des écrivains musulmans, autant que-celle des auteurs grecs et syriaques…les théologiens arabes avaient conscience d’appartenir à une tradition patristique, à laquelle ils tenaient à rester fidèles.’[494]

[494] ‘Despite a serious effort to adapt to the language, the theologians maintained as their priority the dogmas of the faith…the elaboration of a Trinitarian vocabulary by the Arab Christians, often polyglots,

This conclusion might explain the use of a term like *jawhar* , which although unacceptable to a Mu‘tazilī audience, had become the established Arabic translation of the term *ousia* within the Christian community, who were largely responsible for translations of Greek works into Arabic. The Nestorian Metropolitan Elias of Nisibis (d.c.1027), writing about fifty years after ‘Ammār, suggests that the translators of Syriac into Arabic wanted an Arabic word to render the exact meaning of ‘*kiyān*’ but they couldn’t find one so they used *jawhar* because they had no more suitable option.[495] Jawhar, it would appear, had become the standard rendering of the Greek term *ousia*, as translated by Christian translators before ‘Ammār. It is possible then, that ‘Ammār and others, whilst clearly engaging with Muslim concerns, were also writing for a Christian audience and, as Haddad also concludes, were ultimately not willing to compromise their Christian beliefs by confusing terminology which already had a place in the Christian Arabic tradition.

does not seem to have come under the influence of the Muslim writers as much as the Greek and Syriac authors…the Arab [Christian] theologians consciously shared in a Patristic tradition, to which they remained faithful.’ Haddad, *La Trinité divine*, 184-5

[495] Al-Isfahānī, *Épître sur l’unité et la trinité,* p. XVIII

A final and related point to Haddad's may be made in reference to terminology used in Christian Arabic works. From Muslim works of the period it would appear that Muslims were aware of Christian doctrines to the extent that they understood that the differences in terminology did not necessarily indicate a difference in meaning. Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq, writing at a similar time to our three authors, sums up the situation as he saw it:

> 'These distinctions over terminology are really only an attempt to find what is most apt, for each sect prefers the form of explanation it considers more eloquent than any other as a means of elucidating its intention. But despite their differences over explanation and terminology they keep more or less the same meaning as they themselves admit.'[496]

Around a century later, the Coptic theologian, Severus Ibn Muqaffaʻ (d.987), confirmed al-Warrāq's impression:

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[496] Thomas, *Abū ʻĪsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* , 69

> If someone expresses it by saying "individuals" (*ashkhāṣ*) or "properties" (*khawāṣṣ*) or "entities" (*ma'ānī*) or "attributes" (*ṣifāt*) as the Ancients did… the meaning of their expressions is singular, despite the terminology being different.'[497]

Aside from both passages supporting the notion that Christians were trying out different terms in order to convey their single and united meaning as effectively as possible, the former passage also implies that there was a great deal of awareness of this on the Muslim side. If this is the case, then it seems that actually, the terminology itself would not necessarily have been particularly confusing to a Muslim audience beyond the immediate connotations of particular terms, but more likely that it was the concepts themselves with which the Muslim theologians disagreed. This might therefore explain the number of varying terms employed by Christian authors, none of which could ever be perfectly suitable, as the barrier to understanding between the two faiths was not about terminological differences but about conceptual ones.

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[497] Samir, S. K. (ed.) *Severus Ibn al-Muqaffa' Miṣbaḥ al-'aql* (Cairo: Dār al-'Ālam al-'Arabī, 1978), 31.8-32.2 and Ebied, R. and Young, M.J.L. (eds) *The Lamp of the Intellect of Severus ibn al-Muqaffa', Bishop of al-Ashmūnain*, Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, vol. 365, (1975), 7.10-12

5.4 Rational and Logical Proofs

Reason-based, or logical, arguments form a large part of the three authors' explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, for 'Ammār and Abū Rā'iṭa, logical proofs form the basis of their arguments in all of their writings concerning the Trinity. Abū Qurra, although he wrote a number of rational treatises, seems to rely more on scriptural evidence than the other two in terms of his specific work on the doctrine of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. For all three authors, arguments from reason tend either to be drawn from philosophical reasoning, most often Aristotelian thinking, or from common sense deductive logic, as will be explored below.

5.4.1. 'The unity of species'

The major 'rational' argument or tool used by all three authors, relies on the employment of the Aristotelian categories and particularly the often termed 'unity of species'. The use of Aristotelian logic to explain and defend doctrines such as the

Trinity has a long tradition in Christian history, one which can be traced particularly through the Syriac speaking churches in the century prior to the rise of Islam.[498] Renewed interest in Greek thinking among Christian communities at this time led to the development of a Syriac translation movement[499] which is often overshadowed by the later Greco-Arabic translation movement of the early ‘Abbāsid period[500], but which was responsible for a revived Christian use of the sorts of philosophical arguments which can traced back through the writings of the Greek Fathers. In his *Third theological oration*, Gregory Nazianzus states:

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[498] Wallace-Hadrill speaks of Antioch Christians as being only loosely Aristotelian, but says that Syriac speaking churches to the East of Antioch ‘adopted Aristotelian logical method wholeheartedly for reasons which are not in all respects clear…’ Wallace-Hadrill, *Christian Antioch*, 97

[499] For details of Syriac interest in Greek learning prior to Islam, see: Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque,* 110-113.

[500] In Islamic circles, Aristotelian thinking was espoused by philosophically minded individuals such as Abū Yūsuf al-Kindī, who was a contemporary of our Christian theologians, and who saw an important role for philosophy in supporting Islamic revelation. The likes of Abū al-Hudhayl and other Mu‘tazila, however, who involved themselves in Atomistic thinking to varying degrees, sought to affirm the existence and nature of God within in a universe made up of atoms and bodies, something for which Aristotle criticised some of his predecessors in books IV and VI of his *Physics*, as essentially he felt that the concept of a ‘void’ violated physical law. Waterfield, R. (trans.) *Aristotle: Physics* (with introduction and notes by D. Bostock) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) As a result, this meant that, for the Mu‘tazila, God must be conceived as being far removed in His transcendence from this concrete temporal world and that human categories of thought and speech could describe anything which resembled the Creator in any way.

> Our position…is, that as in the case of a horse, or an ox, or a man, the same definition applies to all the individuals of the same species, and whatever shares the definition has also a right to the Name; so in the very same way there is One Essence of God, and One Nature, and One Name; although in accordance with a distinction in our thoughts we use distinct Names and that whatever is properly called by this Name really is God…'[501]

Abū Rā'iṭa's treatise, *al-Risāla al-ūlā*, centres on the differing Christian and Muslim understandings of the term 'one'. In fact, Abū Rā'iṭa opens the main body of the treatise by asking his perhaps hypothetical interlocutor, what he means by 'one', before laying out the possible categories of one in genus, species or number, according to Aristotelian teaching, and then moulding the unity of species into a more Christian unity of substance (*jawhar*), whilst chastising the 'People of the South' for calling God one in 'number'. His logic is that one in genus would mean that God would encompass various species making him differentiated and composite within

[501] Nazianzus, Gregory. 'Third theological oration: (Oration 29)', available from: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/310229.htm; last accessed 7/3/11

Himself which neither Christians nor Muslims would accept; and that one in number would negate the Muslim statement that nothing is comparable to God, as one is a number which is found in the world, and moreover is the start of a series and a part of a number, which itself can be divided, according to Abū Rā'iṭa. One in species therefore is the only way to describe God, which Abū Rā'iṭa expresses in Christian terms, as ‘one in substance’ (*ousia*).

Abū Qurra also indicates his support for the explanation of the unity of species by mentioning two types of names, those which refer to 'natures’ and those which refer to 'persons’. He gives the example of Peter, James and John being three ‘persons’ but having the common name of ‘man’, which refers to a single nature that the three ‘persons’ all share.

In terms of explaining the relationship between the two types of name, as it were, Abū Rā'iṭa speaks of two kinds of statements one can make about things; one being more general and referring to their substance, such as ‘living’ or ‘human being’; the

other being more specific and describing an individual such as ‘Sa‘d’ or ‘Khālid’, whereby the ‘Sa‘d’ could be said to be a ‘human being’, but ‘human being’ could not be said to be ‘Sa‘d’. As discussed in Part One of this study, both Abū Qurra and Abū Rā’iṭa employ Arabic grammatical concepts to help clarify their point.[502]

‘Ammār does not refer directly to the unity of species in the fifth chapter of the *Burhān*, probably due to the fact that the chapter is largely based on his “attribute-apology”, which will be discussed below. In his *Masā’il*, however, ‘Ammār puts the unity of species in more technical and Christian terms than in Abū Rā’iṭa’s *Ithbāt*, by referring to one general comprehensive substance alongside specific substances or hypostases in some detail, particularly towards the end of the section on the Trinity. ‘Ammār explains:

> ‘We could say that the Father is a perfect God, I mean that He is an eternal, specific, perfect substance. And the Son is a perfect God, I mean that He is an eternal,

[502] Cf. Chapter 2, 125-126 and Chapter 3, 169-171

> specific, perfect substance. Then all of this in totality is one perfect God, i.e. one eternal general comprehensive substance.'[503]

Aristotle distinguished between primary and secondary substances, though the primary referred to the particular and individual whilst the secondary referred to the universal and generic. In the sixth century the Alexandrian philosopher, John Philoponus applied this logic to the Trinity: making God the generic secondary substance and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit particular primary substances, a teaching for which he was denounced by the Church. Severus of Antioch led this attack, which drew upon earlier Church Fathers including John Chrysostom (347-407), who speaks of the 'particular' or 'specific' substance of the incarnate Word.[504] What Severus essentially did, was to turn Philoponus' (and therefore Aristotle's) categorisations upside down, by beginning with the general substance as the primary

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[503] Hayek, *'Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 171.8-10. There appears to be no mention of the Holy Spirit at this point, which could possibly be an accidental omission, as the copyist would have been copying an almost identical phrase, and the plural phrase '*jamīa'ha'* is used rather than dual, which refers to 'all of them' as opposed to 'both of them'.

[504] Wallace Hadrill, D.S. *Christian Antioch: A study of early Christian thought in the East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 94

substance which refers to the unity of God, and making the hypostases specific secondary substances, a teaching which ‘Ammār appears to be drawing upon. St. Basil, according to G.L. Prestige, held that the ‘common unvaried substance, being incomposite, is identical with the whole unvaried being of each Person'[505], and also states, in his *Letter 236* that:

> ‘The distinction between οὐσία [ousia] and ὑπόστασις [hypostasis] is the same as that between the general and the particular; as, for instance, between the animal and the particular man. Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give a variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis, in order that our conception of Father, Son and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear.’[506]

The unity of species would have been troublesome for most Muslims who simply were not able accept or understand how one can be three or three can be one, without introducing division or composition in the Godhead. Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq, for

[505] Prestige, *God in Patristic thought,* 243

[506] St. Basil, Letter 236, available from: http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202236.htm; accessed 8/3/11

instance, takes issue with the idea of 'one in substance' rather than numerical oneness,[507] an argument which is most clearly laid out by Abū Rā'iṭa. Although al-Warrāq's treatise is fairly detailed, it centres on the basic impossibility of the hypostases being both differentiated from the substance and identical with it, which he refers to as 'the clearest contradiction'[508]. Al-Warrāq most often uses common sense or simple mathematical logic in refuting the claims of the Christians (which he sets out in some detail).

> 'A further aspect is that they claim that the substance is a thing, and that each one of the hypostases is a thing. It is not possible for them to say the 'one substance' [in terms of being] a thing and not [in terms of] number, just as they cannot claim that it is one in substantiality and not in number. And if it is one thing and the hypostases three things in number, then three things in number and one thing in number are without a doubt four things.'[509]

[507] Thomas, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* , 104
[508] Thomas, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity"* , 76.20
[509] ibid., 106.24-108.1

As with the use of other proofs and tools discussed thus far, the fundamental conceptual impasse regarding the Christian and Muslim conceptions of God becomes apparent once again. Ultimately for Muslims, the Aristotelian categories, which Christians use to help make the doctrine of the Trinity intelligible to human minds, simply cannot be used to describe the divine Being.

5.4.2. 'A Question for the Muslims'

Another form of 'rational' or 'logical' proof worth mentioning briefly, can be seen in instances where Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī ask questions of their Muslim counterparts, phrased in the dialectical style which became a trademark of *kalām* treatises. Here we will only address one particular question which is common to all three authors, as the questions each individual author puts to His Muslim adversaries are dealt with in detail in Part One of this thesis and discussed comparatively in the following chapter.

The question which all three theologians direct at their Muslim counterparts is whether God has a Word. If they say 'yes', then they are in agreement with the Christians, and if they say 'no', then they make God mute and inferior to human beings. Having said 'yes', the Christian author asks whether that Word is a 'part' of God', or, as Abū Rā'iṭa puts it, 'something perfect from something perfect', knowing that his opponent will not allow God to be subject to composition and therefore forcing him to accept the alternative, which in this case leads to an expression of the relationship of God's hypostases to His substance.

Each of the three authors takes this argument to different extents, as will be seen in Chapter Six, but use of *kalām* style argumentation which would have been very familiar to their Muslim counterparts, is a tool which should be noted.

5.4.3. 'The Headship of God'

In his short work given the title 'That God has a Son' by John Lamoreaux, Abū Qurra poses a succession of questions which forces the respondent to follow his deductive

logic to accept the Christian conception of the nature of God as one who must have headship over one like himself, i.e. the divine Son, as the suggestion that He were 'head' over creatures alone would undermine his majesty and exaltedness. These questions then lead to biblical proofs for the Eternal Son.

In the *wujūd al-khāliq* ,[510] one also finds this argument concerning God's attribute of headship and the logic that He must be head over one like Himself, however this treatise is set out differently in that it does not contain the dialectical questions and dilemmas laid out for an opponent, which were a trademark feature of *kalām* writings, and the arguments for God being head over one like Himself come from the fact that Adam is head over one like himself and that he resembles God in his virtues. Once again, if God were to be head merely over creatures whilst Adam were head over humans like himself, then God would be inferior to Adam in some way, which is clearly absurd, Abū Qurra tells his reader.

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[510] Dick, *Maymar fī wujūd al-khāliq,* 221-228

5.4.4. 'Three is the perfect number'

In Abū Rā'iṭa's *al-Risālā al-ūlā*, towards the end of his opening discussion concerning the meaning of 'oneness', one finds a brief little argument concerning the perfection of the number three, which he repeats almost as briefly later on in the same treatise, almost as a way to furnish his description of God's unity.[511] Abū Rā'iṭa's reasoning appears to be that three is the perfect number, as it encompasses both categories of 'odd' and 'even' in their simplest forms. The same argument appears in his younger relative, Nonnus of Nisibis' Syriac apology[512], and in the al-Hāshimī/al-Kindī debate[513] of the late ninth or early tenth century, part of which appears to be directly quoted from Abū Rā'iṭa's work.

Although this particular argument does not appear to be common to patristic works, it can be found earlier than Abū Rā'iṭa, in Timothy I's debate with al-Mahdī.[514] Muslim responses to this argument also appear in Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's *Against the trinity*

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[511] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa*, 70.13-18 and 89.11-15
[512] Griffith, 'The apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis', 124
[513] Newman, *Early Christian-Muslim dialogue*, 381-545
[514] ibid., 163-267

and later in ‘Abd al-Jabbār’s *Mughnī*, which seems to be an almost direct quotation of al-Warrāq.[515] Al-Warrāq logically rebuts this argument by asking whether the Father alone combines the two types of number. An affirmative answer would make Him three hypostases along with the Son and Spirit being three hypostases each, bringing the total to nine. A negative answer implies that the each of the hypostases is imperfect, because none of them combine the perfect number individually.[516]

This little proof, therefore, was certainly known to at least one Muslim polemicist of the early ninth century and was also acknowledged in later generations. It is not employed in the extant works of either Abū Qurra or ‘Ammār. For his part, Abū Rā’iṭa does not appear to put much emphasis on it, only alluding to it very briefly, in comparison with Nonnus, at the end of his discussion of oneness in the sense of ‘one in species’. He then summarises:

> ‘Then you know, we describe God as one but not in the way that you describe him.’[517]

[515] Thomas, *Christian doctrines in Islamic theology*, 272-275

[516] Thomas, *Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq’s “Against the Trinity”* , 148-9

[517] Dakkash, *Abū Rā’iṭa,* 70.16-18

5.5 The "Attribute-Apology"

Perhaps the most fascinating argument, and certainly most original and creative one, employed by Christian authors such as Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, involved the likening of the doctrine of the Trinity to the divine attributes of God, as conceived in Islamic thought. The phrase "attribute-apology" was coined by Mark Swanson in a paper entitled 'Are hypostases attributes?'[518], where he highlights the main features of the apology, which are worth restating here.

1. The assimilation of the Trinitarian hypostases to the attributes of God, in particular attributes that are given in, or deducible from, the *qur'ān*
2. The claim that the point of the doctrine of the Trinity is the affirmation that (1) God is (2) living and (3) speaking (knowing, wise etc.); or, in other versions, that God is (1) an essence, or existing, (2) living, and (3) speaking (knowing, wise etc.)
3. When necessary, the affirmation that each "adjectival" attribute (e.g. existing, living, speaking) corresponds to a nominal form (existence, life, speech) which is a reality in God

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[518] Swanson, M. 'Are Hypostases Attributes? An investigation into the modern Egyptian Christian appropriation of the medieval Arabic apologetic heritage', *Parole de l'Orient*, no. 16, (1990-1991), 239-250

4. The correlation of the biblical names “Father”, “Son” and “Holy Spirit with the attributes discussed, e.g. the Father is the Existence (*al-wuǧūd*), the Son is the Speech (*an-nuṭq*), and the Holy Spirit is the Life (*al-ḥayāt*)
5. An argument as to why the hypostases are only *three* in number[519]

‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, who appears to fit the above schema most closely of our three authors, presents himself as a useful starting point. As mentioned in Chapter Four, in the fifth section of his *Burhān,* ‘Ammār begins by attacking his (perhaps hypothetical) Mu‘tazilī opponents concerning their saying that God is ‘living’ (*ḥayy*) and ‘speaking’ (*nātiq*) without affirming that God has ‘Life’ (*al-ḥayāt*) and ‘Speech’ (*al-nuṭq*.) In doing so, ‘Ammār is puts his finger precisely on a key debate taking place within Muslim circles at the time, criticising the position of those such as Abū al-Hudhayl al-‘Allāf and Ibn Ibrāhīm al-Naẓẓām.[520]

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[519] ibid., 239-40

[520] cf. chapter 1, 57-62 for detail on the teachings of these two Mu‘tazilī thinkers concerning the dicing attributes of God.

God must have Life and Word, he tells his reader, as the word ‘living’ is derived from ‘life’ and one can only tell what something is called from what it has, not what it does not have. If that were the case then one could call inanimate objects such as earth, water and air ‘living’ without having ‘life’. As can be seen, here ‘Ammār uses grammatical and logical reasoning which would not be unfamiliar to his Mu‘tazilī counterparts.

Having established that God must be living and speaking, and therefore must have Life and Word, ‘Ammār concludes that this is only same as what the Christians say: that God is living and speaking and that the Son is His Word, and the Holy Spirit is His Life. In this manner, ‘Ammār comes the closest to directly equating Christian hypostases with Muslim attributes.

As highlighted in point five of Swanson’s schema, ‘Ammār comes face to face with the natural Muslim response to his equation of hypostases with attributes; that is the

question of why are there only three hypostases and not more. The remainder of ‘Ammār’s argument, as shown in Chapter Four is that the two hypostases of ‘Word’ and ‘Life’ are somehow at the basis of all other attributes such as power, wisdom, knowledge and so on. One of the supplementary ways in which he supports this argument is to borrow from the internal Muslim debate in categorising attributes into attributes of essence (*ṣifāt al-dhāt*) and attributes of action (*ṣifāt al-f’il*), and to point out that the Muslims themselves disagree over the attributes of essence and action.[521]

This argument, is, in part, almost identical to one which ‘Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq attributes to ‘one of the Trinitarian theologians’ in his *Against the Trinity*, although he adds the distinction between ‘those who are capable of generation and those who are not’ so that God is ‘generating’ (Father), ‘speaking’ (Son) and ‘living’ (Holy Spirit). Al-Warrāq refutes the argument with his characteristic use of common sense logic, by questioning whether the substance is specified by Life or Speech due to it being a

[521]Cf. Chapter 4, 263-265

substance or for a different reason. If the former, al-Warrāq argues, then all substances must be specified by Life and Speech; and if the latter, then Life and speech must be caused by something else which introduces plurality into the godhead.[522]

As can be seen, 'Ammār's "attribute-apology" precisely fits the criteria highlighted by Swanson. One cannot say the same, or at least not speak with the same conviction, about Theodore Abū Qurra's "attribute-apology".

In his *wujūd al-khāliq*, Abū Qurra gives a list of the attributes of God which could easily be a Muslim list, referring to: existence, life, knowledge, wisdom, seeing, hearing, power, goodness, favour, righteousness, patience, mercy, tolerance, forgiving, and justness. Like Abū Rā'iṭa, as will be seen, and, in some places,

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[522] Thomas, *Abū 'Īsā al-Warrāq's "Against the Trinity",* 130-134

‘Ammār,[523] Abū Qurra appears to then subtly isolate the three attributes of existence, life and knowledge by explaining them in full. For instance, Abū Qurra says that if Adam exists, then surely the one who caused him to exist must also exist; but that God’s existence is not the same as Adam’s.

The isolation of three attributes is also something which Abū Rā’iṭa does, in order to tentatively liken the three attributes to the three hypostases of God. Abū Qurra, however does not do this. Instead, after giving existence, life and knowledge as examples of Godly attributes which can be deduced from Adam’s virtues, and explaining that other attributes such as wisdom, hearing, strength etc. can also be inferred in a similar manner, he suddenly turns to the three distinctly Christian concepts of headship, begetting and procession, which he deems to be the ‘noblest of all virtues’, thus quickly shattering any preconceived notion that his aim is to liken ‘existence’, ‘life’ and ‘knowledge’ to the three hypostases. Unlike Abū Rā’iṭa and

[523] ‘Ammār appears to do this once towards the end of his section on the Trinity in question nine of the *Masā’il,* where he refers to the substance having the properties of ‘existence, life and speech’ 176.18-20

‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, therefore, Abū Qurra never comes close to likening or equating the three hypostases with divine attributes, as conceived by Muslim minds. He does refer to Word and Spirit of God briefly and provides scriptural references which point to the Word and Spirit of God, but very much as part of a traditional Christian explanation of the Son and Spirit as hypostases, not in order to engage with the Muslim question of the divine attributes.

Even more significantly, as touched upon in Chapter Two, Abū Qurra’s entire argument is based on Adam’s resemblance to God, something which would have been fundamentally unacceptable to his Muslim and particularly Mu‘tazilī counterparts, who are told repeatedly in the Qur’an that ‘nothing is like God’[524].

It can be seen therefore, that although Abū Qurra shows an awareness of the names and attributes which Muslims use in relation to God, he either has no understanding of, or no concern for, the intricate and complex debate concerning the ontological

[524] cf. *Qur’ān* 42:11

and semantic status of such attributes or their relationship to the essence of God. Instead he puts forward a clearly traditional Christian exposition, arguing that humans can know something meaningful about God by observing Adam's virtues, and that the three most noble virtues, headship, begetting and procession, reflect the three hypostases and thus God's Trinitarian nature.

His argument is logical and rational; he argues that God must be head over someone like himself, because to only be head over angels and humans, who are further from God than are pigs and insects from us as human beings, would take away from his majesty, therefore he must have begotten an eternal Son. The argument is inventive, logically thought out, and does not rely on Christian scripture, yet unfortunately it is based on a premise which his Muslim, and particularly Mu'tazilī, reader would simply not accept: the resemblance between man and God.

In terms of the criteria outlined by Swanson, Abū Qurra's writings relating to the Trinity do show aspects of the features described above, but to a far lesser extent

than his Nestorian contemporary. Abū Qurra does make mention of the Muslim attributes typically ascribed to God, and speaks of God as being existent (*mawjūd*), living (*ḥayy*) and knowing (*ʻālim*) but does not specifically correlate the Father, Son and Holy Spirit with these attributes and does not go deep enough into the attributes debate to discuss the grammatical issue of the relationship between 'living' and 'life', or to explain why there should not be more than three hypostases, which seems to have been a common question asked by Muslims.

Like Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa also talks about godly attributes, but in a way much more fitting to a Muslim mind. He begins by distinguishing between absolute and relative attributes, an Aristotelian concept, but one which may have been comprehensible to his Muʻtazilī audience, as Abū al–Hudhayl and his colleagues spoke about the meaning of God's attributes in relation to other things; for example, God does not have an attribute of knowledge which is distinct from his attribute of power, but the way in which we can distinguish between the two godly attributes is through their

objects, that is to say between what is known and what is the object of God's power.[525]

Once Abū Rā'iṭa has established that attributes such as life and knowledge must be linked to God's essence, he asks the question central to the divine attributes debate, that is to say *how* they are related. Once again, he lays down two possibilities: either they are parts of something perfect or something perfect from something perfect; knowing that the Muslims must dismiss the former option as it would imply composition and division in the Godhead. Abū Rāi'ṭa leads the reader to this point in a logical and detailed manner and continues to explore the relationship between the attributes: whether they are separate and dissimilar; connected and continuous; or both simultaneously.

Naturally Abū Rā'iṭa opts for the third possibility and thus leads reader smoothly to concept of Trinity, using *kalām-style* logic and without having mentioned the Trinity

[525] Cf. Chapter One

itself. Abū Rā'iṭa's switch from the attributes debate to the Trinity is marked by a sudden change in terminology, whereby he moves from talking about 'attributes' (*ṣifāt*) of life, knowledge and wisdom, to speaking of one substance (*jawhar*) and three hypostases (*aqānīm*). This would imply that Abū Rā'iṭa sees the two conceptions of the nature of God as almost parallel but not linked. In this way, Abū Rā'iṭa suggests a comparison between attribute and hypostasis but never goes as far as to equate them entirely.

Abū Rā'iṭa's "attribute-apology" demonstrates most of the features identified by Swanson: he tentatively assimilates Trinitarian hypostases to the attributes of God; highlights the attributes of life, knowledge and wisdom; touches upon the question of adjectival attributes and nominal forms by referring to the relationship between 'absolute names' and 'relative names'. He does not correlate Father, Son and Holy Spirit directly with the attributes discussed; however, he does respond to the question of why there should not be more than three hypostases, which he finds difficult to

answer other than to reiterate that God’s knowledge and Spirit are essential to Him.[526]

The likening of the Trinitarian hypostases to the divine attributes of Islam is possibly the most original aspect of these Christian Arabic works, both in the sense of using Muslim concepts to explain the doctrine, and in that this forms most polemical aspect of their writings on the Trinity. These Christian theologians, particularly ‘Ammār and Abū Rā’iṭa, actually question and criticise Muslim teachings, rather than simply defending themselves, and their conception of God, in response to Muslim pressures. Whether this employment of concepts and idiom central to the ‘*ilm al-kalām* amount to a development in Christian theology, is the subject of the next, and final, chapter of this thesis.

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526 Dakkash, *Abū Rā’iṭa* , 86.17-87.10

CHAPTER 6: CHRISTIAN THEOLOGIANS EMPLOYING MUSLIM THEOLOGY

6.1. Priorities, emphases and the engagement with Islamic thought

Having examined the works of Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, and investigated the tools and arguments they employ, this final chapter will consider some of the broader questions and themes surrounding the *raison d'être* of Christian works on the Trinity in Arabic.

As has and will be seen, though each author's writings on the Trinity appear similar in many ways, there are subtle differences in emphasis, priority and organisation of their material which creates an appreciable difference in overall effect. In the first part of this chapter, therefore, each author will be discussed individually in order to: assess their respective levels of engagement with Islamic thought; consider their potential audience and purposes for their writings on the Trinity; and identify some of the potential reasons for the subtle variations in presentations of the doctrine. A final evaluation will then be made assessing the extent to which the three Christian

theologians at the heart of this study are responsible for the development of a new form of Christian theology, and the related question of how far they can be considered Christian *mutakallimūn*, in order to shed further light on Christian-Muslim engagement in early ninth century Islamic society.

6.1.1. Abū Qurra

As established in chapter two, Abū Qurra bases his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity on the three themes of what can be known about God, the relationship between faith and reason, and Christianity as the true religion. Through the use of these themes, his intention is to show that, rationally speaking, only Christianity can claim to have the correct balance between faith and reason and, through various criteria, be the true religion. This prelude to his defence of the doctrine of the Trinity is important, as it informs his subordination of reason-based proofs to scriptural ones, on the basis that he has already rationally proven Christianity to be the true religion.

Therefore, his reader should automatically accept Christian scriptures, which indicate God's Trinitarian nature.

In approaching the matter from this angle, Abū Qurra appears not to be trying to prove the truth of the doctrine, but explaining it in a way which makes it less obscure. The proofs and arguments he uses are largely based on biblical quotations and analogical or metaphorical illustrations, which adopt Aristotle's unity of species in order to demonstrate the possibility, and indeed reasonableness, of the doctrine of God as one *ousia* and three *hypostases*.

In actual fact, it would seem that Abū Qurra's employment of rational criteria in order to determine Christianity as the true religion is the most creative and reason-based aspect of his writings pertaining to the Trinity. Other Christians do use a similar set of criteria, as seen in both Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār, as well as the predominantly Syriac writer Nonnus of Nisibis,[527] but the theme is one which seems to be more

[527] Griffith, 'The apologetic treatise of Nonnus of Nisibis'.

emphasised in the extant works of Abū Qurra. The Melkite bishop goes into detail on this theme in his *wujūd al-khāliq*, and uses it as in introduction to his Trinity specific treatise, which has been referred to in this study as his *Mīmar*. He outlines a set of rational criteria by which the true religion can be determined and, in both cases, the concept of the true religion is closely related to the Trinity in that it these criteria prove the veracity of Christianity, and therefore the truth of the description of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is duly stressed by Abū Qurra.

As Griffith insightfully notes, the concept of the 'true religion' is based on:

> 'the philosophical premise that human reason can discover the existence of the creator God, and then conclude that mankind is the highest expression of created values'[528].

This is interesting as it is something with which Abū Qurra's Muslim and perhaps Mu'tazilī contemporaries would not fundamentally disagree. Indeed, the Mu'tazila

[528] Griffith, 'Comparative religion', 66

placed a great deal of emphasis on reason as a god-given faculty,[529] as opposed to the Christian tradition which tended to consider reason or intellect as a more worldly trait.[530] What the Mu'tazila would certainly have rejected, however, is the notion that these 'created values' could in any way resemble the divine being, which is what Abū Qurra goes on to argue, that God's qualities are reflected in the virtues of mankind. Nevertheless, Abū Qurra may well have felt that emphasis on a set of rational criteria for the true religion was the best point of entry into discussion with his Muslim counterparts over the doctrine of the Trinity, as it relied on the sort of common sense logic which was central to the thinking of the Muslim *mutakallimūn*.

An undisputable awareness of Islam can be seen throughout Abū Qurra's writings concerning the nature and unity of God, though perhaps not as direct or deep an engagement, when compared with his younger contemporaries, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī. Three broad examples can be used to demonstrate the varying

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[529] However, it should be noted that this god given reason was only considered to be given to the elite few, a view also held by Ibn Kullāb, although he was less elitist in the sense that he allowed that one could be a believer through faith, even if they were sinning through not using reason. See: Ess, *The flowering of Muslim theology,* 153-4; 184-5

[530] ibid.

extent of Abū Qurra's engagement with Islamic thought. These are: scriptural evidence; logical proofs based on the Aristotelian unity of species and illustrative analogies; and his discussion of the attributes of God.

As demonstrated in Chapters Two and Five, Abū Qurra's primary concern in his treatise dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity is scriptural evidence, which he feels should be automatically accepted on the basis that Christianity can be rationally shown to be the true religion. As such, scriptural proofs form a central part of Abū Qurra's explanation of the Trinity, whereas they appear to be used in a more supplementary manner by the other two authors, who do not rely as much on their previous demonstration of the true religion, or who at least seem to feel that the doctrine of the Trinity in itself should be explained as rationally as possible, most likely in response to the Muslim accusation of *tahrīf*.

The biblical references Abū Qurra selects are a combination of proof texts which support the Trinitarian nature of God, such as Matthew 28:19 or passages referring

to the Son or Word or Spirit as God, as well as those which can be creatively interpreted to suggest an indication of the Trinitarian nature of God, when more than one God or Lord appears to be speaking or being addressed. Many of these proofs would be traditional in the sense of being used before the coming of Islam, and particularly in debates with the Jews. There is, therefore, engagement with his Islamic context to a point, but Abū Qurra is essentially still using a tool which would be fundamentally unrecognised by his Muslim counterparts.

After concentrating on scriptural proofs, Abū Qurra launches into an explanation of the distinction between two types of 'name' or 'noun', using Aristotle's unity of species as a tool for explaining how the Trinity can be both three and one. This must be deemed, at least partially, a response to the apparent contradiction of something being simultaneously singular and plural, which was the very crux of the Muslim problem with the Christian description of God. As demonstrated in Chapter Five,

however, the use of Aristotelian categories to help clarify the Trinity in logical terms goes back further than Christian encounters with Muslim objections.[531]

Abū Qurra illustrates the unity of species using the common analogy of three men sharing one human nature. Recognising the imperfection of this analogy, primarily as three men are individual beings separated in terms of place and distinct in form, he then adds analogies of light, a poem recited by three voices, three gold coins sharing gold as their common underlying substance, and other examples, all to elaborate upon his point that the doctrine of the Trinity is logically conceivable, in as far as human minds can conceive things about the divine nature. Although careful to repeatedly mention the ultimate transcendence of God, Abū Qurra does not really acknowledge his opponents' distaste for analogy. In this respect he is much like the other two theologians whom we are examining and theologians of previous generations such as John of Damascus (c.675-c.754), the anonymous author of 'On

[531] Cf. Chapter 5.4.1.

the Triune Nature of God', Theodore bar Konī (d. late 8th/early 9th century) and the Patriarch Timothy I (d. 823), who in turn drew upon the Church Fathers.

Perhaps the best example of Abū Qurra's seemingly 'lesser' engagement with Islamic thinking in comparison to his Christian colleagues concerns the divine attributes of God. As discussed in the previous chapter, Abū Qurra does make an attempt to explain the Trinitarian nature of God by beginning with the Muslim concept of the divine attributes, giving a Muslim-sounding list which he agrees can be attributed to God. However, he then claims the two 'most noble' attributes are the markedly Christian attributes of Headship and Begetting, which allow for the Christian conception of the Godhead as Begetter, Begotten and one who Proceeds. Moreover, he infers the existence of such attributes from the virtues of Adam, thus implying the resemblance of man to God, something which his Mu'tazilī counterparts very much strove to avoid.

During the course of his treatise on the Trinity, Abū Qurra does ask one question which appears to be specifically directed towards his Muslim audience, and particularly his Mu‘tazilī audience, which is whether God has a Word. His Muslim reader, he feels, must say yes because otherwise God would be mute and inferior to human beings who do have a word, that is to say are able to articulate. He then continues by asking whether the Word of God is a part of God, and, knowing that the Muslims will not accept composition in the Godhead, concludes that His Word must be a full hypostasis. This argument is incredibly brief, a brevity which becomes more apparent when compared to his contemporaries.

The first part of his question, as to whether God has a Word, is a question also asked by ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī in his Book of Proof. For ‘Ammār, this is the opening question of his fifth chapter on the Trinity, and is one which sets the tone for the whole chapter, as he begins by questioning his Mu‘tazilī counterparts directly about their doctrine of the divine attributes. The second question, as to whether the Word of God is a part of God, can be found in Abū Rā’iṭa’s *al-Risālā al-ūlā*. For Abū Rā’iṭa, however, this

question forms part of a whole series of logical questions used to force his reader along his line of thinking, which ultimately leads to the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Meanwhile, Abū Qurra simply concludes that God must have a Word as He cannot be considered mute; His Word cannot be a part of Him as He cannot be composite; and then jumps to the conclusion that His Word must be a hypostasis, without truly engaging with the intricacies of Islamic thought on the nature of God in the way that someone like ‘Ammār does in his *Burhān*, whereby he asks about God's Word in the context of a Mu‘tazilī teaching that God is ‘speaking’. There is no doubt that Abū Qurra is engaging with Islamic thought in terms of adopting some of its language and style of argumentation, perhaps just not as much as his two colleagues studied here.

There are a number of possibilities as to why Abū Qurra's work does not appear to engage with Islamic thinking as much as his younger contemporaries, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can only really be tentatively inferred from the

limited sources available. One possibility is that he was as aware of Mu‘tazilī thinking as his two contemporaries, but saw more benefit or potential success in proving Christianity as the true religion through rational criteria and therefore felt that this was the best way to prove the truth of Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, whose truth could only ultimately come from the Bible. Certainly from his extant works we know he wrote three specific treatises on the true religion[532] and refers to miracles indicating the true religion in a treatise on the holy law, the prophets and the confirmation of Chalecedonian orthodoxy[533], as well as outlining his criteria as a prelude to his explanation of the Trinity. He also spends time discussing the question of what the human mind can know about God on the basis of reason, as found particularly in his *wujūd al-khāliq*, and his *Treatise on the way of knowing God and the confirmation of the eternal son*[534]. Whilst his two Christian contemporaries both treat similar topics, they would not appear to link them to the doctrine of the Trinity in

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[532] Cf. ‘On the Existence of God and the true religion’ in Dick, *Maymar fī wujūd al-khāliq;* ‘The treatise on the confirmation of the gospel’ in Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara,* 71-75 and ‘On the characteristics of the true religion’ in Dick, I (ed. and trans.), ‘Deux écrits inédits de Théodore Abu-qurra’, *Le Muséon*, 72, (1959), 53-67

[533] Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations*, vol. 1, 460ff.

[534] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 75-82

quite the same way. That might explain the difference in emphasis of his writings from Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār.

On the basis of our knowledge, it is difficult to go further, but one may speculate that the prioritisation and extensive use of biblical proofs indicates that Abū Qurra is not as concerned about the charge of *taḥrīf* as the other two authors; or perhaps that because he relies on his rational criteria for the true religion to prove veracity of Christianity and therefore its scriptures, *taḥrīf* is less of an issue in his eyes. As a Melkite who would have been particularly indebted to the works of John of Damascus and fairly far removed from the Muslim seat of power during his lifetime, one might also speculate that his impression of Islam may have been slightly influenced by the Palestinian Father, who appeared to view Islam as little more than a Christian heresy. By Theodore's time, of course, Islam would have been an ever more present reality as a fully fledged faith in its own right, and the contents of Abū Qurra's works themselves attest to this, but it is certainly possible that he felt the pressure of his

Muslim counterparts a little less keenly than his two contemporaries, and therefore was inclined to take Islam a little less seriously.

A final important and interrelated factor to consider when looking at the nature of these works is the intended audience for Christian Arabic works on the Trinity. In terms of internal evidence, Abū Qurra does not generally make overt references to his audience in his Arabic works, though the often subtle use of Qur'anic allusions and content of his writings show that his readers may well be Muslims, whilst he also provides a number of arguments and biblical proofs which suggest an intention to equip other Christians with tools to defend themselves and to strengthen their own faith in the face of Islam. In his *Mīmar*, Abū Qurra himself speaks of the Holy Spirit strengthening those who are weak in faith, and 'stoning' the reader with a 'valid argument, as if with a rock, to keep you from disturbing the Church's children…'[535]

[535] Bacha, *Oeuvres arabes de Théodore Aboucara*, 28.13-15

This would suggest a double audience; that what will follow in Abū Qurra's treatise is designed both to keep Muslims at bay (who seem to be the 'you') and to strengthen Christians in order to stop them from being 'disturbed', that is to say being led astray and thus converting to Islam. Mark Swanson, in his assessment of 'On the Triune Nature' and the 'Three Treatises' of Abū Qurra, concludes of Abū Qurra that: 'he writes for a Christian audience- but always seems to imagine Muslims reading over their shoulders or listening in the background.'[536] This conclusion certainly has merit, and gives a plausible explanation for Abū Qurra's blend of traditional Christian arguments and proofs with Qur'anic allusions and response to Muslim concerns. For the likes of Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār therefore, the question may well be how much closer to their shoulders their Muslim contemporaries were.

Abū Qurra is asking some of the same broad questions as his Muslim, and most likely Mu'tazilī, counterparts concerning the relationship between faith and reason, and what can be known about God in the context of competing religious traditions.

[536] Swanson, 'Apologetics, catechesis, and the question of audience', 132

His writings certainly betray his Islamic context in terms of topics, language, and style but he is answering these questions in a fundamentally Christian way, using traditional proofs from both the Bible and analogies with nature, deriving knowledge of God from the attributes of Adam, and referring to the three hypostases as 'Begetter, Begotten and Proceeding' in a similar way to John of Damascus and the Fathers before him.[537] Theodore Abū Qurra, therefore, clearly has an awareness of Islam but appears to engage less with Islamic thought than his younger contemporaries, as will be seen further in due course.

6.1.2. Abū Rā'iṭa

Abū Rā'iṭa's emphasis and focus in terms of explaining the nature and unity of God is different to that of Abū Qurra. The theme which dominates his *al-Risāla al-ūlā* is that of the oneness of God, and specifically an attempt to explain the difference between the Muslim and Christian conception of 'one'. Whilst his two contemporaries naturally

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537 Cf. John of Damascus, *Exposition*, 6, 8, 11 etc.

also dedicate time to how God may be one and three, as it is the mystery at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity, neither of them spend as much time considering the meaning of the term 'one' in itself. Abū Qurra responds to questions by rejecting the claim that the Christians worship three gods, and 'Ammār addresses the question of God being one and three in the first question of his *Masā'il*, but both begin from the already established notion that God is one and three and then attempt to show how their position is not inherently contradictory; whereas Abū Rā'iṭa recognises the need to address the concept of oneness specifically. His claim is that the Muslims have misunderstood the Christian unity of species as a numerical unity, which is at the base of their disagreement. The difference in approach is only very slight, but does suggest that Abū Rā'iṭa not only understands the position of his Muslim adversaries, but seriously attempts to address their issue directly.

Like Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa, discusses similar criteria for the true religion, after which he also concludes that miracles are the only positive indicator of the true religion and that negative criteria such as 'desire for the Hereafter', 'conversion by the sword' and

‘the allowance of what is forbidden’ are some indicators of ‘untrue’ religions, criteria which he clearly feels apply to Islam. However, he does not specifically introduce the doctrine of the Trinity through this discussion of the true religion in the same way as Abū Qurra. Abū Rā’iṭa’s rational criteria for the true religion appears in his more general work on the Christian religion almost as a separate section, finished off with supporting biblical proofs, before moving onto the Trinity as one of the major doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam.

In his more Trinity specific treatise, and the one generally thought to be aimed more at the Muslim *mutakallimūn*[538], specifically the Mu‘tazila, the topic of the true religion is not mentioned. The difference is extremely subtle, but might suggest that Abū Rā’iṭa did not make as direct a link or rely on the criteria for the true religion in quite the same way that Abū Qurra appears to have, in terms of proving the credibility of the doctrine of the Trinity.

[538] Cf. Chapter 3.5

In Abū Rā'iṭa's writings, particularly the *al-risāla al-ūlā,* rational and logical proofs take centre stage, as he recognises that scriptural evidence would not be accepted by his Mu'tazilī counterparts. The accusation of *taḥrīf* is topic which is mentioned in *al-risāla al-ūlā* [539], and appears to exert an influence over Abū Rā'iṭa's explanation of the Trinity in as much as he prioritises logical and rational proofs over scriptural ones. It is patently clear then, from even the most superficial reading of his works, that the Monophysite theologian of Takrīt is taking heed of Muslim concerns.

Abū Rā'iṭa's engagement with Islamic thought can be seen from the very outset in his *al-Risāla al-ūla*, in which he is clearly seeking common ground or at least a common starting point between Christians and Muslims. As discussed more fully in Chapter Three, Abu Rā'iṭa's inclusion of a statement of belief which sounds like a Mu'tazilī one serves to show basic points of agreement and to engage with his Mu'tazilī opponents in terms which would be familiar to them. His starting premise is that both faiths agree that God is one, but that their respective concepts of oneness

[539] Dakkash, *Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī*, 91, 96-97

differ. He then sets out to clarify the Christian conception of oneness in a way that might be more acceptable to a Muslim audience.

Abū Rā'iṭa's creative use of Islamic concepts and language can be detected through his Mu'tazilī sounding statement, in which he echoes Qur'anic phrases such as 'First and Last' (57:3) and 'Knower of the seen and unseen' (6:73, 23:92), but then also subtly appears to change phrases to prepare the reader for the Christian viewpoint and subsequent explanation of the nature of God. The most significant example of this is when Abū Rā'iṭa mirrors Qur'anic language by saying of God that He 'has no partner in his dominion' (17:111, 25:2), but with the significant insertion of the term '*jawhariyya*', so that he actually speaks of God 'having no companion in his *substantial nature* or his dominion'.[540]

As seen in Chapters Three and Five, the term *jawhar*, which many Christians writing in Arabic used to render the Greek term *ousia*, was a term which for the Mu'tazila,

[540] ibid., 64.7

who made use of atomistic thinking to aid their definitions of the material world, had very concrete and worldly connotations. If accepted that Abū Rā'iṭa is responsible for inserting the term *jawhariyya* as opposed to quoting a Muslim source, then this would suggest not only a deep awareness of and engagement with Islamic thought, but also shows Abū Rā'iṭa to be a clever and creative apologist, who gives an insight into a Christian worldview using Qur'anic allusions and Mu'tazilī concepts, in a manner not unlike Abū Qurra.

The Aristotelian categories, to which Abū Qurra also refers, form a large part of Abū Rā'iṭa's treatise on the Trinity, and the analogous examples he gives in both of his treatises are numerous. More than any of the three Christian authors studied here, Abū Rā'iṭa defines his terms most precisely, and leads his reader carefully through his arguments and terminology in order to clarify the doctrine of the Trinity. Again, it would appear that his very use of the categories shows a level of awareness of Islam, as reason-based proofs were required in order to explain the doctrine of the Trinity to a Muslim audience. The use of Aristotle to clarify the relationship between

the members of the Trinity was by no means inspired by the challenge of Islam, of course, but the need to use logical and philosophical arguments, set against the backdrop of the thriving translation movement, appears to have forced Christians back to their Hellenistic heritage in order to re-employ such arguments.[541]

Like Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa also makes use of the concept of divine attributes. Here Abū Rā'iṭa questions his reader as to what they mean by God is 'living' or 'knowing' or 'powerful' and recognises the distinction between attributes of essence and attributes of action, in order to ask about the relation of the essential attributes to God's essence, concluding that they must be something perfect from something perfect and that they must be simultaneously connected and dissimilar. It is at this point that the Jacobite theologian introduces doctrine of the Trinity.

As noted in Chapter Three, Abū Rā'iṭa's switch from the attributes debate to the Trinity is marked by a sudden change in terminology, whereby he moves from talking

[541] Cf. Chapter 5.4.1.

about ‘attributes’ (*ṣifāt*) of life, knowledge and wisdom, to speaking of one substance (*jawhar*) and three hypostases (*aqānīm*). This would imply that Abū Rā’iṭa sees the two conceptions of the nature of God as almost parallel but not linked.[542] In this way, Abū Rā’iṭa suggests a comparison between attribute and hypostasis but never goes as far as to equate them entirely.

Abū Rā’iṭa , in a similar manner to his Christian contemporaries, also employs more traditional Christian arguments such as biblical proofs and Trinitarian analogies, often moulded to fit the Islamic context in which he found himself. These types of argument have been explored in detail throughout this study. For Abū Rā’iṭa and ‘Ammār, scriptural evidence is used in a more supplementary fashion than for Abū Qurra, and, according to Keating, is carefully selected in order to remain as uncontroversial and

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[542] Suermann agrees, noting: ‘Die ganze Darstellung des Problems der Attribute Gottes scheint also eine Hinführung auf das Problem der Trinität als eines Gottes in drei Personen zu sein…Für Abū Rā’iṭah ist der Begriff Attribut nicht mit Hypostase und Person gleichzusetzen. Er setzt nirgends diese drei Begriffe gleich, indem er etwa sagte, die Attribute Gottes sind die Hypostasen oder die Personen. Er ist aber nur ein kleiner Schritt bis dahin.’ (‘The whole presentation of the attributes of God seems therefore to be an introduction to the problem of the Trinity as one God in three persons…For Abū Rā’iṭa, the concept ‘attribute’ is not to be equated with hypostasis or person. He does not equate the three concepts anywhere, in that he almost says that the attributes of God are hypostases or persons. It is, however, only a small step towards this.’) Suermann, ‘Der Begriff ṣifah bei Abū Rā’iṭah’,163

as acceptable as possible for his Muslim audience; the Jacobite theologian generally preferring Old Testament references which are less subjected to the accusation of falsification or corruption, and those which refer to God's Word and Spirit, as the Qur'an also makes reference to these things.[543] Whether one subscribes to Keating's theory or not, it is evident that biblical proofs are not heavily relied upon in Abū Rāiṭa's works on the Trinity.

Abū Rā'iṭa's writings on the Trinity, like Abū Qurra's, are clearly a Christian response to a Muslim rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity, but at the same time show a deep awareness of and engagement with the actual problem that Muslims have with the doctrine of the Trinity. In a certain respect, he actually is engaging the most directly of the three theologians with his Muslim counterparts, as he addresses the basic or fundamental problem at the heart of the whole issue for the Muslims, which is the difference in the two faiths' respective understanding of the term 'one'. Abū Qurra, as we have seen, for the most part demonstrated the explanation of the Trinity in

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543 Keating, S. 'The use and translation of scripture in the apologetic writings of Abu Ra'ita al-Takriti', 257-274.

traditional Christian terms, relying heavily on biblical proofs. ‘Ammār, as we have seen and will see, engaged even more deeply by entering the Muslim attributes debate and criticising Mu‘tazilī teachings in a more direct way than Abū Rā’iṭa, but in doing so perhaps risked losing sight of the fundamental problem of the doctrine as Muslims saw it.

Abū Rā’iṭa, therefore, clearly took the concerns of his Muslim counterparts seriously, and attempted to address those concerns in a more involved way than his Melkite contemporary. Whilst Abū Qurra shows less engagement and interest in Mu‘tazilī thought, Abū Rā’iṭa, in his *al-risāla al-ūlā* , takes the time to examine Muslim concerns, address the crux of the problem that Muslims have with the doctrine of the Trinity and responds by using their language and moulding his arguments to be more fitting for a Muslim mind.

Abū Rā’iṭa therefore uses both traditional arguments moulded to fit his Islamic context, and responds creatively to Muslim objections to the Trinity. His arguments

were later to be quoted by the author of the al-Kindī/ al-Hashimi correspondence,[544] and Christians such as Yaḥyā ibn ‘Adī would use similar arguments later around half a century later.

The main aim of his writings, as he says himself in both of his works concerning the Trinity, is to lay out the teachings of the “People of the Truth” (that is to say the Jacobite Church) at the request of a fellow Christian or Christians, presumably to be able to defend themselves and perhaps strengthen their own faith. In *al-Risāla al-ūlā*, an unnamed Christian appears to be looking for advice on how to respond to 'the People of the South'. From the level of engagement with Muslim, and particularly Mu‘tazilī, thought however, it is clear that the work is also aimed at the Muslim *mutakallimūn*, whom he most likely expected to read his works. Indeed, we know that at least one of his works was written to a contemporary Muslim *mutakallim* by the name of Thumāma ibn Ashras al-Baṣrī.[545]

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[544] Newman, N.A. *Early Christian-Muslim* dialogue, 355-545

[545] Keating, Defending the “People of Truth”, 335-345

Why Abū Rā'iṭa writes in this manner is difficult to say with any conviction. Geographically speaking, it is likely that Jacobite theologian of Takrit lived in close contact with Islamic intellectual thought from where he may have gained his clearly deep awareness of Islamic thought. His emphasis on the 'oneness' of God may have something to do with his Monophysite persuasion; we know he was keen to distinguish himself from his Melkite and Nestorian colleagues, as amongst his extant works we find several interdenominational refutations.[546]

6.1.3. 'Ammār al-Baṣrī

'Ammār deals with many similar topics and questions to his two contemporaries within his writings on the Trinity. Like his contemporaries, he lays down a criteria for the true religion before dealing with the doctrine of the Trinity, but not in the same sections as his writings on the Trinity. As is the case with Abū Rā'iṭa, 'Ammār is concerned with *taḥrīf:* in both of his works, the whole section preceding the chapter

[546] Thomas and Roggema, *Christian-Muslim relations*, 568

on the Trinity is dedicated to the authenticity of the Christian gospels.[547] As with both of his Christian colleagues, ‘Ammār also makes use of Aristotelian thinking, as well as Trinitarian analogies and scriptural proofs, to bolster his explanation of the Trinity.

Once again, however, his central focus, emphasis, and method of explaining the doctrine are different to that of his Melkite and Jacobite contemporaries. In both works, ‘Ammār develops a line of argument which comes the closest to directly equating the divine attributes debate with the doctrine of the Trinity, and shows deep engagement with Mu‘tazilī ideas. The groundwork for this argument is laid from the opening ‘question’ of the *Masā’il*. Using common sense logic, Ammār establishes from the natural order of the world that it must have a Creator who has certain characteristics, such as will: ‘It will not be possible to imagine volition and will and judgement except in those who have a ‘word’ (*kalima*). And ‘speech’ or ‘articulation’ (*nutq*) cannot be imagined except in those who have a life’[548].

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[547] Indeed, Mark Beaumont refers to ‘Ammar’s section in the ‘Questions and Answers’ as ‘the most thorough apologetic treatment of the authenticity of the Gospels from an early 9th-century Christian theologian writing in Arabic…’, Thomas and Roggema, *Christian Muslim relations*, vol. 1, 605

[548] Hayek, *‘Ammār al-Baṣrī*, 149.19-20

‘Ammār’s overall argument is that God can be shown to have two essential attributes which are somehow at the base of all others; that all others derive from them in a sense. The two attributes are ‘Word’ and ‘Life’, which can be equated with the Son and Holy Spirit in Christian thinking, according to the Nestorian theologian.

In the fifth chapter of the *Burhān*, this argument is found once again, and indeed dominates the whole chapter, after a discussion of whether God has ‘Life’ and ‘Word’ according to his Mu‘tazilī counterparts. This opening discussion is also worth mentioning, as it shows ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī engaging directly in the divine attributes debate by asking whether God is said to be living, and shows the difference in depth of engagement between ‘Ammār and someone like Abū Qurra, for example. Abū Qurra did ask the question of whether his opponents say that God has a Word, which he appears to assume his reader will accept, before asking whether that Word is a ‘part’ of God or not, without concerning himself too much as to the Muslim understanding of God’s Word.

‘Ammār, on the other hand, forms a line of questioning in such a way that it is apparent he is engaging with a Mu‘tazilī opponent such as Abū al-Hudhayl. ‘Ammār recognises that his opponent will call God ‘living’ in order to deny ‘death’ of him, but will not positively attribute ‘Life’ to God, as in his opponent’s eyes that would compromise God’s transcendence. In their attempt to protect God’s transcendence, ‘Ammār tells his reader, his Muslim opponents have stripped God of His attributes and majesty. As such, he shows awareness of all the intricacies of the divine attributes debate, and criticises it in a similar way to Muslim opponents of the teaching of Abū al-Hudhayl and his colleagues. Elsewhere in the *Masā’il*, ‘Ammār questions the sense of saying that all attributes are identical to God’s essence, as that would make them identical to each other and therefore indistinguishable.[549] This again is a criticism which was levelled at Abū al-Hudhayl and his followers by their own Muslim opponents.

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[549] Cf. 250

The argument, which categorises substances according to whether they are living and speaking in order to show the essential nature of the two attributes, appears to be particular to ‘Ammār in terms of extant Christian Arabic works of the period. As seen in Chapter 5.5. neither Abū Qurra nor Abu Rā'iṭa employ the “attribute-apology” in quite the same way, although both write about the existence of God and consider the Son to be the ‘Word’ and Holy Spirit to be His ‘Life’. Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq summarises an argument which he attributes to ‘one of the people of the Trinity’, [550] and which very closely resembles ‘Ammār’s explanation using the divine attributes, particularly in his *Masā’il*.

There can be no doubt that ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s explanation of the Trinity is the most creative and displays the deepest engagement with Islamic thought of the three authors, whether or not he had a particularly greater awareness or not. This is not to suggest that his explanation of the doctrine of the doctrine differs drastically in terms of content: as established previously, he uses a number of similar arguments,

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[550] Thomas, *Abū ‘Īsā al-Warrāq’s “Against the Trinity”* ,130

responds to similar Muslim questions and concerns, and adopts similar language and style as his fellow theologians.

On closer reading, however, it can be seen that, in approach, he does differ. His, more than any of his Christian contemporaries, is an attempt to tackle nature and unity of God within an Islamic, and specifically Muʿtazilī, conceptual framework, and the only one to really attack a Muʿtazilī conception of the nature of God. As a result, ʿAmmār goes furthest in likening the doctrine of the Trinity to the divine attributes debate, by making a statement which appears to be directly equating hypostases with attributes.

In equating the divine attributes of Life and Word with hypostases as seen in the *Burhān*,[551] ʿAmmār appears to cross the line into the Muslim conceptual framework of the divine attributes debate, not only using linguistically and stylistically, but conceptually too, to a greater extent than both Abū Qurra and Abū Rā'ita. In doing

[551] Hayek, *ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī*, 48.18-20

so, ‘Ammār sets himself up for a Mu‘tazilī counterattack based on the dictates of the Islamic framework which he has apparently entered. It soon becomes clear that ‘Ammār does not consider hypostases to be attributes; however, the implication of his comparison of the divine attributes to hypostases is significant. If he were to commit fully to the Islamic conception of the nature of God by following the implied logic of his correlation of hypostases to attributes, then he would effectively destroy the doctrine of the Trinity, by making the Son and Holy Spirit mere attributes of the Father.

Ammār’s deep engagement with Mu‘tazilī thinking is most likely to be a result of his living in Basra, right at the very heart of Islamic intellectual thought. Belonging to the Church of the East as the majority of Christians in the areas around Basra and Baghdad did, ‘Ammar continued in an intellectual tradition of contact and debate with Muslim thinkers, particularly the *mutakallimūn*, who enjoyed the patronage of the early ‘Abbasid caliphs. Many Nestorian scholars were responsible for translations of Greek works into Arabic during this period and individuals such as the Patriarch

Timothy I, who famously debated with the Caliph al-Mahdi in 782, was Patriarch of the Church of the East in Baghdad. Before him, one finds the Syriac writer Theodore bar Konī, thought to live somewhere between Kufa and Basra in the second half of the eighth century, who also engaged with Islamic thought. ‘Ammār seems to have continued in this tradition but with what appears to be a great degree of intellectual ease and confidence in his Islamic surroundings.

As with all of the authors studied here, the question of audience is a potentially significant factor influencing the tone and emphasis of such writings. The only indication of an addressee in ‘Ammār’s writings is someone he refers to as the *‘mu’min bi-l-wāhid’*, ‘believer in the one’, which would certainly seem to be a reference to a Muslim, and may well be an opaque reference to someone who particularly stresses the unity of God, namely someone of Mu‘tazilī persuasion.

Although it is likely that ‘Ammār’s writings were partly aimed at Christians looking to defend their beliefs, there appears to be a stronger Muslim element to his audience

than for either Abū Qurra or Abū Rā'iṭa. This is reflected by the level of engagement with Islamic thought as detailed above and the much more proactive nature of his works in questioning and challenging his Mu'tazilī counterparts directly rather than merely responding to their concerns. Here one might speculate that 'Ammār was better positioned and therefore better equipped than his Melkite and Jacobite contemporaries to challenge Muslim teachings, or perhaps he was no more aware, but simply more concerned to engage with Islamic thought, primarily through being in Basra, at the cutting edge of the development of Islamic thinking.

'Ammār is evidently serious about Islam in the sense that he has clearly taken time to understand the intricacies of the development of Islamic thought, in this case particularly concerning the nature and unity of God. His engagement would certainly seem to imply that he has more respect for Islamic thought, or perhaps a greater sense of the reality of Islam as a complex religious tradition in its own right, than does his Melkite contemporary.

With his writings, ‘Ammār is, at the very least, clearly holding the doctrine of the Trinity and the debate over the divine attributes of God up side by side in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christian doctrine and, indeed, the absurdity of the Muslim position. Whether he is making a serious bid to show how the difficulties of the divine attributes debate can be solved through the acceptance of the doctrine of the Trinity however, is unlikely, despite his apparent equation of hypostases with attributes. His expression of the Trinity in most places is a traditional Christian one, and, from the clear depth of knowledge the Nestorian theologian has about Islam, one might speculate that it is unlikely that he would have thought a true comparison of the two conceptions of God were possible.

In addition, ‘Ammār certainly goes the furthest into Islamic intellectual territory, but like his Christian contemporaries, also includes traditional arguments and proofs that would be unacceptable to a Muslim reader. This might suggest both a Christian and Muslim audience of his works, though with a stronger Muslim element than the works of his contemporaries, with the exception perhaps of Abū Rā’iṭa’s *al-Risāla al-ūlā*.

‘Ammār certainly appears to have been a creative theologian, one with the knowledge and tools at his disposal, in order to express Christian doctrine in a manner suited to the Islamic context in which he lived.

6.2. The role of Christian Arabic works

6.2.1. Audience and purpose

A pertinent theme which underpins the whole of this study, and has been considered briefly in terms of each individual author, is the question of audience. The works of Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī, and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī are written in Arabic, contain very overt to very subtle Qur’anic allusions and language, and often make reference to Muslim opponents and Islamic thought, particularly Mu‘tazilī thought; but also contain various proofs and terminology which would be unacceptable to a Muslim reader, and more so a Mu‘tazilī reader. Such issues have thrown up numerous questions concerning audience, purpose and intentions of such works. Many scholars have come to the conclusion that the works of Arabic-speaking

Christian authors, such as the ones studied here, are primarily aimed at a Christian audience with the intention of both strengthening their faith in the face of pressure to convert to Islam and equipping them with the tools to defend Christianity in an Arabic-Islamic context. These conclusions are based on both internal and external evidence.

Internal evidence has been discussed above in relation to each individual author. In terms of external evidence, scholars highlight Christian texts of the same period which point to the supplanting of Greek, Aramaic and Syriac by Arabic; the gradual integration of Christians into Islamic society; and the subsequent conversion of a large number of Christians.[552] In this way, it is felt by a number of modern scholars that our three authors aimed their works at a primarily Christian audience who would face Muslim opposition, but with some indirect engagement with a Muslim audience, or the secondary intention of Muslims reading their works.

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[552] See: Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque*; and Swanson, 'Arabic as a Christian language?'

Thus, Sidney Griffith suggests that the main purpose of Christian writings was to stop Christians from converting,[553] but that those such as Abū Qurra made an ‘obvious appeal’[554] to the Musim *mutakallimūn*. Of ‘Ammār’s *Masā’il*, he says: ‘[it] was a serious bid to dialogue with Muslim intellectuals, composed realistically, no doubt, with a view to a largely Christian readership.’[555] Keating supports this view, believing that: ‘Christian theologians sought to ameliorate the circumstances through writings designed to give answers to common theological questions posed by Muslims that at the same time encouraged Christians in their faith.’[556] Swanson paints the metaphorical picture of works being intended for a Christian audience, with Muslims ‘reading over their shoulder’.[557]

In terms of the writings of Abū Qurra on the Trinity, and perhaps Abū Rā’iṭa’s more general work, the *Ithbāt*, this conclusion would seem to make the most sense. For

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553 Griffith, ‘Faith and reason in Christian *kalām*’, in Samir and Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arab apologetics*, 5

554 Ibid., 38

555 ’‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s kitāb al-burhān’ in Griffith (ed.) *The beginnings of Christian theology in Arabic*, 154;

556 Keating, Defending the “People of Truth”, 32

557 Swanson, ‘Apologetics, catechesis, and the question of audience’, 131-134

Abū Rā'iṭa's specific treatise on the Trinity and 'Ammār's works however, a more direct intention of writing for a Muslim audience would seem more likely given the depth of engagement with Mu'tazilī thinking shown at times in each of the authors' works.

'Ammār's works are clearly aimed at a Muslim, and more specifically, a Mu'tazilī reader in certain places. From the beginning of the fifth chapter of the *Burhān*, 'Ammār directly questions his (perhaps hypothetical) reader about his own teaching that God is 'living' and 'speaking' but does not have Life or Word, and goes on to use the notion of the divine attribute to clarify the concept of hypostasis. His whole discussion is set on a Mu'tazilī premise and his logical arguments which lead to the doctrine of the Trinity are clearly aimed at a Muslim audience, whether directly or indirectly.

Meanwhile lists of Muslim works include titles of writings addressed to Christians; Abū al-Hudhayl wrote a refutation against 'Ammār, whilst one of Ibn al-Murdār's

targets was Abū Qurra. Evidence of the existence of such works raises the possibility that Christians also wrote works addressed to their Muslim counterparts; indeed we know of one instance of Abū Rā'iṭa writing a short piece on the credibility of Christianity for the Mu'tazilī Thumāma ibn al-Ashras al-Baṣrī.[558] In addition, evidence of Christian participation in *munāzarāt* at the Caliph's Court,[559] shows that there was direct engagement between members of the two faiths who were living side by side in many places. It is likely, therefore, that the Muslim audience for such works would have been fairly prominent, even if they were an indirect audience in some cases. Indeed the few extant examples of anti-Christian polemic from the ninth century show that Muslims knew the teachings of their opponents in some detail, which would suggest that Muslims were familiar with Christian works in Arabic.

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558 Keating, *Defending the "People of Truth*", 336-7

559 See: Ess, J van, 'Disputationspraxis in der islamischen Theologie. Eine vorläufige Skizze', Revue des Étues Islamiques, 44 (1976). Many reports of such debates appear to be invented as a fictional literary device, mainly due to them being written long after the event, by unknown authors who are often quite disparaging towards Islam. However, it is likely that they are based on some truth. See: Griffith, *The church in the shadow of the mosque,* 102ff

Positing a more direct Muslim audience for some of these works does not necessarily mean that Christian authors were intending to convince Muslims to accept the truth of their doctrines. Despite engagement with Islamic thought to varying extents, and the use of logical and rational proofs to make the doctrine of the Trinity more palatable for Muslims, Christian authors continued to use more traditional biblical and analogical arguments, and none of the authors studied here can be said to have participated fully in the conceptual framework of *kalām*, beyond using elements of its logic to help potentially clarify their expressions for a Muslim audience.

Indeed, it is clear that Christians could not participate fully in the distinctly Islamic enterprise of *kalām* without destroying their own doctrine, as ‘Ammār could almost be seen to do. Conversely then, it is perhaps likely that Abū Qurra, Abū Rā’iṭa and ‘Ammār would not have wanted to persuade their Muslim counterparts, or at least that they were in no way prepared to compromise their theological integrity in order to do so. The common intention of the Christians studied here, despite their differences

in the extent of engagement with Islamic thinking, was to demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine rather than prove its truth.

Abū Qurra, despite the creative use of rational arguments concerning other topics, actually presents a very traditional explanation of the Trinity; Abū Rā'iṭa engages further with Islamic thought in his explanation but it is clear to him that Christians and Muslims have fundamentally different conceptions of oneness, and is careful to change the terminology he uses when leading from the context of the divine attributes to that of the Trinity. Even ʻAmmār, who goes the furthest in setting the doctrine of the Trinity into the conceptual framework of the divine attributes, appears to be laying out an argument for demonstrating the similarities between the two realms of thought, rather than actively trying to persuade his Muʻtazilī counterparts. In line with this, one sees that although his argument is creative, he never fully commits to the conceptual framework of the Muslims. After equating the attributes with hypostases he then attempts to protect the perfection of the hypostases, presumably because his Muʻtazilī opponent would then be able to refute his explanation on the

basis of the divine attributes, which the Muslims clearly did anyway, by asking questions such as why there are not more than three hypostases: a natural question when one begins to conceive of hypostases as attributes. Meanwhile ‘Ammār’s model, if set against a more traditional model of the Trinity would raise questions as to the co-eternity, equality and relationship of the hypostases as he presents them.

There can be little doubt that Christians living in the Islamic Empire and writing in Arabic on the doctrine of the Trinity in the early ninth century were responding to Muslim concerns. This can be seen from the very topics they address, as well as the specific questions they answer in order to clarify and defend their doctrine on the nature and unity of God. The responses of Abū Qurra, Abū Rā’ita and ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī all contain traditional Christian arguments and proofs, most often moulded to suit the language, style and concerns of the Muslim *mutakallimūn*; whilst also incorporating renewed arguments based on Greek philosophical, and particularly Aristotelian, thought, again adapted for the task at hand; and finally more original

arguments based on common-sense logic typical of *kalām* and the principles of the internal Muslim debate concerning the nature and unity of God.

The levels of originality and creativity vary from author to author as has been seen throughout this study. Yet it would seem fair to conclude that, in general, all three authors were responding creatively to the context in which they found themselves, some, like ‘Ammār, going as far as to openly counterattack and criticise Muslim teaching on the unity of God, rather than simply to defend his own conception of the divine nature.

6.2.2. The place of Christian theology in Arabic and the question of the "Christian *mutakallim*"

Discussing Theodore Abū Qurra's 'Discerning the True Religion' Sidney Griffith makes the thought-provoking observation that:

> 'In this milieu Christian religious thinking found an opportunity for a development of doctrine that went beyond the initially apologetic mode in which it was rooted. Christian *mutakallimūn* actually adopted a way of presenting the traditional teachings of the church in an Arabic idiom conditioned by the Islamic frame of reference in the midst of which they lived.'[560]

The concern of this thesis has been to assess to what extent this way of presenting traditional teachings represents a development in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and to what extent it represents more of an apologetic enterprise, a creative response to the context in which Christians found themselves.

By the time that Abū Qurra and his two younger contemporaries began to compose their works, Islam was clearly an established reality which was not going to fade away. All three authors therefore, composed works aimed at equipping their fellow

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[560] Griffith, S. 'Faith and reason in Christian *kalam*. Theodore Abū Qurrah on discerning the true religion', in S.K. Samir and J. Nielsen (eds), *Christian Arabic apologetics during the Abbasid period (750-1258)*, Leiden, 1994, 5
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Christians with tools and arguments to defend their faith in a new Arabic-Islamic context and rebutting the charges of the Muslim *mutakallimūn*.

For ‘Ammār in particular, living in one of the major political and intellectual centres of the Islamic Empire would have meant that he felt this reality most keenly. Indeed, he obviously caused problems and was taken seriously by his Muslim counterparts, as the great Mu‘tazilī leader Abū al-Hudhayl himself saw need to respond to ‘Ammār’s writings.

It is not difficult to see why. ‘Ammār engaged with Islamic thought to a greater extent than his Christian colleagues, concerning himself with the intricacies of the divine attributes debate and relating it to the doctrine of the Trinity in a way which might logically be accepted by his Muslim counterparts. He criticised a particular Mu‘tazilī teaching of the divine nature of God, accused his opponents of stripping God of any entitative attributes and pointed out the flaws in his opponents’ conception of God, in

order to argue that the Christian conception of God is logically and rationally a better representation of the ultimately transcendent nature of the divine being.

Indeed, in the section on the Trinity of his *Burhān*, ‘Ammār spends the first part attacking Muslim doctrine, introduces the Trinity using the Muslim conception of God’s attributes and then defends his explanation using an innovative and logical argument designed to show how all attributes depend on the two attributes of ‘Word’ and ‘Life’, furnishing his explanation with only a few biblical proofs and Trinitarian analogies. The natural question which arises is of how seriously ‘Ammār took the claims and teachings of Islam. One is tempted to ask whether his use of the language and logic of the Mu‘tazila is indicative of a clever opportunist, versed in the rhetoric and concepts through his position as an intellectual thinker in Basra and so attempting to use the Mu‘tazilites’ own logic to defeat them; or whether it is indicative of a theologian shaped by his Islamic context, engaging seriously with Muslim, and specifically Mu‘tazilī, language and logic in order to rearticulate Christian thought in these terms, that is to say to develop new form of Christian theology.

Certainly Christian authors writing in Arabic engaged with Islamic theological thought, albeit to varying extents, which has led modern scholars such as Griffith, Swanson, Keating, Suermann and many others to refer to them as Christian *mutakallimūn*, literally, those involved in the practice of *kalām*.[561] The nature and concerns of *kalām* have been introduced theoretically in chapter one, and the question is very much one which relies on definition, and definitions which have certainly changed over time. Here, however, we will attempt to approach the question of whether these Christians can be called *mutakallimūn* in a more practical way, by asking whether they were essentially engaged in the same enterprise as, or at least a parallel enterprise to, the Muslim *mutakallimūn*.

For the sake of a more meaningful discussion, ʻAmmār and Abū al-Hudhayl will form the focus here: ʻAmmār as the Christian author who engages most with Islamic theological thought of the three studied here; and Abū al-Hudhayl as not only one of

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[561] Keating refers to Abū Rā'iṭa as 'a *mutakallim* in his own right, the Christian counterpart to those Islamic scholars at the turn of the ninth century who sought to defend their faith through rational arguments.' Keating, Defending the "People of Truth", 34

the early great proponents of *kalām*, but also someone who potentially actually engaged in debate with ‘Ammār.

Abū Hudhayl and his colleagues were undoubtedly defenders of the faith. Numerous sources attest to their engagement in polemic and apologetic on behalf of rulers such as al-Mahdi and al-Ma‘mūn, and lists of works show a high proportion of works written against those of other faiths.[562] However, the *mutakallimūn* were also very much engaged with notion of truth, seeking to show the truth of a doctrine almost independently of revelation, by making use of aspects of Greek thought, such as atomistic thinking in the case of some of the Mu‘tazila, and using common sense logic based on the world around them.[563]

They were, therefore, often criticised for subsuming revelation to reason, but their endeavours were all in service of promoting the truth of Islam and strengthening and defending their religion. At the same time, the *mutakallimūn* were attempting a

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[562] Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist.*

[563] Frank, R. M. ‘The science of kalām’, *Arabic sciences and philosophy*, 2, 1992, 18

rationalisation of the world beyond the immediate needs of the Islamic faith, asking ontological questions about the nature of God, and trying to find language to express that nature without compromising His divine transcendence.[564]

The question to ask, perhaps, is whether ‘Ammār would be happy to be considered to be doing the same thing for the Christian faith. In other words, in his writings on the Trinity, is he searching to articulate the truth of Christian doctrine through a Mu‘tazilite system of thought? Is he posing serious ontological questions? Is he testing Christian doctrines against rational criteria or did he merely see the opportunity to explain the doctrine of the Trinity creatively in *kalām* terms?

One would perhaps have to conclude the latter: the tools he uses to defend the Trinity are generally traditional Christian proofs expressed in an Arabic idiom, which failed to convince his Muslim counterparts as the conceptual differences between the

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564 Frank points out that ‘conceptual language is often strained to its limits when the theologian undertakes to formulate propositions about God and His attributes.’ Ibid., 30

two conceptions of the nature of God could not be overcome[565]. His concern does not appear to be to test his own Christian faith or to ask fundamental questions about the nature of the divine being, which had been established in Christian thought for centuries. Where he does engage the furthest with an Islamic conception of God, ‘Ammār is almost forced to compromise his Christian model of the Trinity for one whereby the Son and Holy Spirit are reduced to attributes of the Father. For all his creativity, it would seem that ‘Ammār is doing essentially the same thing as Abū Qurra and Abū Rā’iṭa, only to a different extent, and that all three authors are primarily acting as apologists for Christianity, moulding their writings to the context in which they live.

Looking at Abū Qurra’s explanation of the Trinity, on the other end of the scale, it would be very difficult to argue that he is involved in a parallel enterprise to the Muslim *mutakallimūn*, in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity at least. Where Abū Qurra

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[565] See: Thomas, D. ‘A Mu’tazili response to Christianity: Abu ‘Ali al-Jubba’ī’s attack on the Trinity and Incarnation’, *Studies on the Christian Arabic heritage*, R. Ebied and H. Teule, Leuven; Paris; Dudley, 2004; and _______., ‘Christian theologians and new questions’ in E. Grypeou, M. Swanson and D. Thomas (eds) *The encounter of eastern Christianity with early Islam,* Leiden; Boston, 2006.

does engage with Islamic theological thought, his engagement is a definite response to the Muslim challenge, at times showing little interest in the intricacies of Muslim doctrines, and he presents a very traditional Christian model of the Trinity. Abū Rā'iṭa would seem to be placed somewhere in between 'Ammār and Abū Qurra, though closer to Nestorian theologian than the Melkite. What all three of the Christian authors appear to be doing, in their writings on the Trinity, is holding the doctrine up next to the Muslim debate over the divine attributes, in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christian doctrine, for both Muslims and Christians. Although there are differences between the three authors, the reliance of all three on traditional scriptural proofs and analogical arguments amongst others, despite the apparent Mu'tazilī distaste for such arguments, would suggest that these authors could not really hope to convince their Muslim counterparts of the truth of the Trinity.

Ultimately, it would perhaps be naïve to hope that one could provide a definitive answer to this challenging question, fundamentally as *kalām* is such an elusive concept, and yet it is a fascinating issue which is raised as a result of this thesis. On

the basis of this brief consideration, one might suggest that the Arabic-speaking Christian authors of the early ninth century may be referred to as 'Christian *mutakallimūn*' in some respects: they are defenders of their faith in response to Islam and use logical and rational criteria to support the truth of Christianity. Indeed, *Kalām* has been identified as a 'procedure' in one 'restricted sense'.[566] However, the question to ask is perhaps whether they are doing this as a service for Christianity in itself, perhaps prompted by the development of Islamic thought around them and their immersion in Islamic culture, or whether they are more simply explaining their traditional doctrines in response to Muslim concerns and pressures. The difficulty perhaps lies in the fact that, whatever its roots, *kalām,* at some point, developed into a distinctly Islamic discipline which came to comprise much more than purely apologetics.

Yet, if we phrase the question a little differently, and ask it in terms of a parallel exercise, and the seriousness with which Christians might have taken their own

[566] Ess, Josef van. 'The beginnings of Islamic theology', 105

kalām-based arguments, the picture begins to look a little different. Under these circumstances one would be hard pressed to consider Abū Qurra a *mutakallim*, and even Abū Rā'iṭa, who very much conforms to common sense logic in leading to his explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity and addresses the specific Muslim problem with the Trinity, still presents a very traditional picture of doctrine overall, which does not fully conform to the accepted logic of the '*ilm al-kalām*.

'Ammār al-Baṣrī is the theologian who engages the most fully with the Islamic intellectual environment and attempts a logical system which demonstrates that the divine attributes of Word and Life can be shown to be inherent to the essence of God in a way that other attributes are not, before showing the likeness to the Christian hypostases of Son and Holy Spirit. He also goes the furthest in questioning Muslim doctrines rather than purely defending his own, and in almost offering the Trinity as a solution to internal Muslim issues concerning the nature of God. In this context, one can well imagine 'Ammār al-Baṣrī moving in similar intellectual circles to the Muslim

schools and sects of Basra, participating in debate with them. And yet, whether one can call truly him a *mutakallim* in the fullest sense, remains open to question.

Essentially, Christians continued to use arguments with roots in traditional Christian doctrines, and all three authors studied here defended the traditional Christian doctrine of one substance and three hypostases. This, however, is not to belittle their achievements in any way. Christian theology certain took on a new form in Arabic: the language and concepts employed in order to explain Christian doctrine, in a language increasingly co-opted by Islamic concepts, make works from this period distinct from the outset. Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī all appear to have engaged with Islamic theological thought in a bid to be taken seriously in their attempts to demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine of the Trinity, for both Muslims and other Christians faced with the challenges of Islam.

Moreover, through the use of reason based arguments it would seem that these Christian authors posed a real threat to Muslims, as they were not merely basing

arguments on scripture, which could have been simply rejected by their opponents, but were identifying common rational starting points and producing logical arguments in the dialectical style of *kalām*, and were therefore challenging their adversaries to respond in turn. Whether considered successful or not, their writings were certainly significant enough to be addressed by the likes of Abū al-Hudhayl and ibn al-Murdār and it is likely that they all would have been involved in debates at the caliph's court at some point during their respective careers. Moreover, in terms of their theological legacy, their arguments can be found, often almost completely unchanged, for centuries afterwards, used by those such as Yaḥyā ibn 'Adī (d.974), Severus Ibn al-Mu'qaffa (d.987), and Muḥyī al-dīn al-Isfahani (fl.11th or 12th century). This, in itself, is a significant achievement.

CONCLUSION

Sources from the Islamic Empire in the early ninth century provide a fascinating insight into Christian-Muslim engagement, which is as enlightening as it is equivocal. What is evident is that, by this time, Christians living under Islamic rule were composing theological works in Arabic, explaining and defending their beliefs and practices within the Islamic milieu. These Christians, of whom Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa al-Takrītī and 'Ammār al-Baṣrī are representative, employed Muslim terminology and concepts in order to clarify doctrine of the Trinity, by tapping into a Muslim debate concerning the nature of God and His divine attributes.

From their writings on the doctrine of the Trinity it is clear that these three authors are involved in a similar enterprise, using very similar arguments and tools in order to explain and demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine for the purposes of both Christian and Muslim readers. What a close analysis of these texts also reveals, however, is that the three authors differed in terms of their subtle priorities and

emphases within their treatises, and in terms of the extent to which each engaged with Islamic thought and participated in the development of a Muslim activity. This can be seen from both the individual discussions of each author in Part One of the thesis and the comparative discussions in Part Two.

Abū Qurra's writings on the Trinity, to a greater extent than his contemporaries, are linked to his project of discerning the 'true religion'. Christian scripture, which clearly indicates the Trinitarian nature of the divine being, should be accepted on the basis of Christianity having been proven to be the only religion to have come from God, as Abū Qurra sees it. The Melkite Bishop, therefore, appears to put less emphasis on 'rational proofs' in terms of the doctrine of the Trinity and engages least in terms of likening the doctrine of the Trinity to the divine attributes debate.

Abū Rā'iṭa, meanwhile, especially in his *al-Risāla al-ūlā*, takes a different approach. His concern is very much to engage with his Muslim counterparts by beginning from the agreement that God is one and very much focusing on rational proof in the

ensuing discussion, only using traditional Christian analogies and biblical proofs towards the end of his treatise in a sort of supplementary fashion. The Jacobite theologian of Takrit clearly uses terms and concepts from the Muslim debate about the divine attributes in order to lead his reader logically to the doctrine of the Trinity. Moreover, his emphasis from the very beginning on the two faiths' differing conceptions of the term 'one' betrays not only a remarkable depth of understanding of his opponents' position, but also a willingness to engage with the problem specifically as Muslims saw it. Although texts are very impersonal and judging them is not easy, there is the impression of Abū Rā'iṭa of a more direct grasp with the key issue that is causing the Muslims problems.

Whilst the Jacobite theologian might be said to recognise the crux of the Muslim issue with the doctrine most clearly, his Nestorian contemporary undoubtedly goes the furthest in engaging with their Muslim counterparts, both in terms of likening the two conceptions of the unity of God, and in asking direct questions of his Muslim adversaries, pointing out a number of inherent contradictions within a particular

Muʿtazilī conception of God's relationship to His attributes. In this way ʿAmmār al-Baṣrī shows himself to not only be a well-informed apologist, but also an accomplished polemicist.

Chapter Five examined tools and proofs which each of the authors used to aid their explanation of the Trinity. Generally speaking, it would appear that in terms of the tools Christian authors employed, most would appear to be traditional Christian proofs for the doctrine with a creative Islamic twist. Biblical proofs and Trinitarian analogies are the most traditional aspect of their arguments, whilst the employment of rational proofs based on Greek philosophy and logic, although most often having roots in the apologetic tradition before Islam, were adopted to suit the Muslim context. The most original aspect of their works is undoubtedly the variations of the "attribute-apology" they each develop, based on the Muslim conception of the nature and unity of God. What this chapter also highlights, however, is the fundamental conceptual difference between the Christian and Muslim understanding of God,

which ultimately prevents any of these proofs from being persuasive to a Muslim audience.

Despite their differences in approach, it is clear that each of the three theologians at the heart of this study adapted their works to suit their particular Islamic context, by using religiously nuanced Arabic idiom and Muslim modes of thought to lead their reader to a Christian conception of God. Undeniably, the borrowing and utilisation of Muslim language and concepts has the effect that Christian theological works in Arabic would be unrecognisable in other contexts. However, it does not necessarily follow that what one finds in these works is a new expression of the doctrine of the Trinity, or indeed a parallel exercise alongside their Muslim counterparts in considering and therefore articulating their Christian faith in a new way.

Certainly, being immersed in Islamic culture and being regularly asked questions about their faith framed in a distinctly Islamic mode of discourse, Christians had to address these questions and find ways to explain doctrines such as the Trinity in a

way that their Muslim counterparts might understand. Ultimately, however, despite engaging with Islamic thought and likening the doctrine of the Trinity to the Islamic concept of the divine attributes to varying degrees, each author presents a fundamentally Christian apology. Their continued use of traditional arguments such as biblical proofs and Trinitarian analogies, along with terminology they felt best conveyed the Christian conception of God's substance, without apparent concern for Muslim objections, points to this conclusion. Moreover, the fact that Abū Qurra and Abū Rā'iṭa, although they effectively hold up the doctrine of the Trinity alongside the divine attributes debate in a very tentative comparison, the latter more so than the former, never actually go as far as to equate Christian hypostases with divine attributes, suggests that they do not conceive of their doctrine in Muslim terms. Even 'Ammār, who goes the furthest in likening the two conceptions of the nature of God, and could be accused of equating hypostases with attributes, still goes on to present a very Christian model of the Trinity in which hypostases could never be considered attributes.

Equally, this is not to suggest that Christians were not thinking about similar sorts of questions as their Muslim counterparts, as they lived in a society that was coming to be dominated by Islamic theological concepts and techniques, and were therefore pushed to respond to those who were directly posing questions about the nature of God, framed in an Islamic manner.

Therefore it would be unfair to go as far as to suggest that Christians were simply using empty apologetic devices for the sake of their Muslim counterparts; and the fact that a large element of their audience would have been Christians seeking to strengthen and defend their faith in the face of Islam meant that Abū Qurra, Abū Rā'iṭa' and Ammār were required to think about their doctrines in relation to Muslim objections, in order to respond to Islamic accusations accordingly.

It would appear that Abū Qurra and his contemporaries, in their writings, are attempting to hold up the Muslim and Christian conceptions of the nature of God side by side, in order to indicate a tentative comparability or likeness, but never actually

suggest that the two conceptions of God can be likened. This can be seen most clearly in Abū Qurra who mentions divine attributes such as ‘existence’, ‘life’, ‘knowledge’ and so on, but then explains that the most noble attributes of God are the distinctly Christian attributes of Headship and Begetting.

Abū Rā’iṭa, who begins from the common notion that God is one, discusses God in terms of the attributes of ‘life’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘wisdom’ and then changes his terminology to talk about the Trinity in Christian terms, furnishing his Christian expression of God with Trinitarian analogies and biblical proofs.

‘Ammār, particularly in the *Burhān*, dives into the particulars of the divine attributes debate to the point where he appears to directly equate the attributes of ‘word’ and ‘life’ with the Son and Holy Spirit, before stressing the perfection and distinction of the hypostases as self-subsistent entities.

In this way, all three authors, to differing extents, are clearly making use of the logic and concepts of *kalām* but always maintain a certain distance. For if they were to follow through with the implications of attributes being equated with hypostases, as potentially seen in relation to ‘Ammār, then they would have been forced to present a very unorthodox model of the Trinity, or indeed one which would destroy the doctrine completely.

All three authors, therefore, come to offer a traditional Christian view of God, presented, where possible, in terms that their Muslim opponents might understand. To this end, they all refer to God having divine attributes, Abū Rā’iṭa and ‘Ammār seek common starting points, that is to say the agreement that God is one and the agreement that He is ‘living’ and ‘speaking’. Both authors give priority to reason based arguments over scriptural ones, especially in the works that appear more directed at a Muslim audience. All three authors use a number of terms relating to God’s nature in order to clarify their expression of one substance (*jawhar*) and three hypostases (*aqānīm*).

Perhaps the best way to describe Christian works on the doctrine of the Trinity in Arabic is to echo Keating's words that they formed a 'creative response'. Our three Christian authors, and particularly 'Ammār, certainly show creativity and originality in taking on Muslim concepts and likening them to the Trinity, but at the same time appear very much to be responding to Muslim concerns rather than actually understanding the doctrine of the Trinity in new terms. In this way they appear to be demonstrating the reasonableness of the doctrine, rather than trying to persuade their reader of its truth.

The related question of whether these three authors can properly be called Christian *mutakallimūn* is a challenging one, and essentially very much depends on one's understanding of *kalām*. If simply considered to be apologetic using a certain form of logical reasoning and language, then there may be grounds to refer to these three Christian authors as such. If understood to require deep engagement with Islam as a distinctly Islamic discipline, then really only 'Ammār al-Baṣrī can be seen to engage with Islamic thought to such an extent, and even he is unable to conform fully to the

dictates of an Islamic theological framework in terms of his explanation of the Trinity. The question can be approached in a slightly different manner, by asking whether ‘Ammār and his Christian contemporaries were engaged in a parallel exercise to that of the Muslim *mutakallimūn*, that is to ask whether they were seeking to explain Christian revelation through rational means and therefore perhaps testing their established Christian doctrines against new criteria. A definitive answer is difficult to provide, as the question is one of intentions and how far Christian authors actually believed in their adapted explanations of the Trinity.

Ultimately, it would appear that, for all their efforts, Christians and Muslims were working in different conceptual frameworks which would not allow for the comparison of their respective doctrines on the nature and unity of God. Nevertheless, Christian attempts to clarify their doctrines in the context of Muslim theology are impressive.

Theodore Abū Qurra, Abū Rā’iṭa al-Takrītī and ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī clearly felt the need to respond to Muslim questions and objections concerning their doctrines; and their

responses, although varied in degree, all display remarkable elements of creativity and originality, and a keen awareness of Islamic thought. They thus adapted their explanations of the doctrine of the Trinity to fit the Islamic context in which they lived, in order to demonstrate the reasonableness of the doctrine, as their context required. Whilst perhaps not a development in Christian doctrine, as such, their accomplishments and legacy in translating their doctrines into the Arabic Islamic context are undeniable.

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